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Communicating Crimes: Covering Gangs in Contemporary Canadian Journalism

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Graduate Program in Media Studies
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy
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COMMUNICATING CRIMES:
COVERING GANGS IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN JOURNALISM

(Spine title: Communicating Crimes)

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By

Chris Richardson

Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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entitled:

Communicating Crimes:

Covering Gangs in Contemporary Canadian Journalism

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requirements for the degree of
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Date _____

Chair of the Thesis Examination Board

Abstract

In this integrated-article dissertation, I examine representations of gangs in Canadian journalism, focusing primarily on contemporary newspaper reporting. While the term “gang” often refers to violent groups of young urban males, it can also signify outlaw bikers, organized crime, terrorist cells, non-criminal social groups, and a wide array of other collectives. I build on Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical framework to probe this ambiguity, seeking to provide context and critical assessments that will improve crime reporting and its reception. In the course of my work, I examine how popular films like *West Side Story* inform journalists’ descriptions of gangs. Though reporters have been covering suburban gangs for decades, they continue to place gangs in the “inner city,” which fits better with imagery from the Manhattan musical. Meanwhile, politicians and political commentators frequently exploit the ambiguity of gangs, applying its rhetoric to opponents and evoking criminal connotations in mediated debates. Based on these findings, I argue that Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence envelopes contemporary Canadian newspapers and I suggest that journalists must incorporate alternative images and discourses to challenge these problematic communication practices. Consequently, my last chapter explores art projects in Regent Park and Clichy-sous-Bois, where I find techniques that challenge the dominant tropes of gangs within the news media and provoke more nuanced conversations about such groups. I conclude by outlining the implications of my research for journalists, gang scholars, and concerned citizens.

Keywords: Bourdieu, Canada, Crime, Discourse, Gangs, Journalism, Popular Culture

The structural violence exerted by the financial markets, in the form of layoffs, loss of security, etc. is matched sooner or later in the form of suicides, crime and delinquency, drug addiction, alcoholism, a whole host of minor and major everyday acts of violence.

-Pierre Bourdieu (1998, p. 40)

In analysing discourses themselves, one sees the loosening of the embrace, apparently so tight, of words and things.

-Michel Foucault (2006, p. 54)

I always tell the truth, even when I lie.

-Tony Montana (*Scarface*, 1983)

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my spectacular wife, who read each word of this dissertation in its myriad versions, multiple times, and frequently under the pressure of an impending deadline. Claudie, you are wonderful and I am in your debt.

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I would like to thank everyone who encouraged and supported me, particularly my supervisor Dr. Romaine Smith Fullerton. She helped me throughout my research and made the process far less stressful than it could have been. I am also indebted to my second reader Dr. David Spencer, who, in addition to providing sage advice, always had an interesting story to tell. At The University of Western Ontario (UWO), I am honoured to have Dr. Carole Farber, Dr. Tim Blackmore, and Dr. Marshall Mangan serve as examiners. It is also my privilege to have Dr. Stephen Ward, James E. Burgess Professor of Journalism Ethics and endowed Chair in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, participate as external examiner. I sincerely appreciate their close critical readings and insights.

Beyond the committee, I shared invaluable discussions with friends, family, and faculty: Claudie Massicotte (UWO), Liam Kennedy (University of Toronto), Dr. Stephen Muzzatti (Ryerson University), Dr. Hans Skott-Myhre (Brock University), and Dr. Nick Dyer-Witheyford (UWO). Perhaps most importantly, I wish to express my gratitude to my parents, grandparents, and extended family, who always asked for copies of my publications to show the neighbours—those poor neighbours.

I am also thankful for the institutional support I received, which included a Doctoral Fellowship from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada and funding from The Faculty of Information and Media Studies, The Western Graduate Thesis Research Fund, and The Society of Graduate Students at The University of Western Ontario.

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Preface

Joe Friesen, a friend of mine, began covering the Jane-Finch area of Toronto for *The Globe and Mail* in 2005. As a media scholar, I tried to keep a distance, not letting my admiration for his skills as a journalist diminish my critical interrogations of his work. I always held a deep respect, however, for the challenges Joe faced in covering that neighbourhood. Many newspaper readers see Jane-Finch, he explained to me, as the Canadian equivalent to South-Central Los Angeles, where Bloods and Crips continue to fight a bloody war that has claimed more than 15,000 lives (Richardson, 2007). Of course, Jane-Finch is nothing like LA, though there are Bloods and Crips vying for territory in both areas. Jane-Finch has a different history. It is situated within a distinctly Canadian context of racial politics, public policy, and cultural norms, not the least of these differences include Canada's positions on healthcare, education, welfare, and gun control.

Regardless of these nuances, the line between fiction and fact has become blurred for many readers with the release of films like *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and *Menace II Society* (1993), television dramas like *The Wire* and *Law and Order*, and the widespread appeal of gangsta rap groups like G-Unit and NWA. These popular cultural products inform many North Americans' views of what gangs look like, sound like, and act like both inside and outside of the spaces in which they exist.

I have always been fascinated by this confluence of lived experience and cultural production. My latest exploration of this theme is a co-edited collection with Hans Skott-Myhre entitled *Habitus of the Hood* (2012). The present study, as in that book, finds that

journalists have great trouble—as we all do—separating works of fiction from lived realities.

In 2007, I began working on my M.A. thesis at Brock University, which I later titled “‘Canada’s Toughest Neighbourhood’: Surveillance, Myth, and Orientalism in Jane-Finch.” As I explored contemporary Canadian journalism coverage of Jane-Finch, I came across two quotations that continue to disturb me. The first appeared in a 1979 *Toronto Star* article in which two young reporters liken a fight among a group of youths in the area to “a scene from *West Side Story*” (Heller & Teshler, 1979, p. A1). I found this comparison to a musical in which gang members sing and dance incredible.¹ Did these women really think that Bernstein and Sondheim’s Broadway play was anything like the Jane-Finch I had known as a youth growing up in Toronto? Could they really have made this comparison—as I read it—seriously? Their description spoke volumes to me about the different social positions that sometimes collide in mainstream crime reporting. The second quotation that struck me was from my friend, Joe Friesen (2007), who wrote of certain Jane-Finch youths who “consider themselves Bloods, an identity borrowed from the gang wars of Los Angeles” (p. A16). This statement is much more critical, but also telling of the way gang culture in Los Angeles—real and imagined—has influenced subjectivities north of the border.

¹When I was growing up in Scarborough, our public school teacher brought us to a production of this musical at a nearby high school. My peers and I were not accustomed to attending a theatrical play, particularly one in which the actors fight, dance, and sing at the same time. Consequently, I recall a moment toward the end of the performance, when a character on stage had been shot and lied dying in front of an elaborately decorated back-alley scene. Someone behind me yelled out: “You’re fucking dying, idiot! Stop singing!” This relatively adolescent example, I think, illustrates well how some people can remove themselves from the exigencies that such violence would normally entail in order to accept that a gang member would sing about his tragic demise while others, myself included, find it very difficult.

The perceptions of journalists and readers rely heavily on popular narratives of gangs, crime, and inner-city dramas, which are projected and reflected onto neighbourhoods like Jane-Finch. This dissertation attempts to uncover how these narratives unfold within coverage of gangs in Canadian journalism. This multi-faceted study has allowed me to explore this issue in a number of ways. I focus on contemporary reporting, specifically in the large urban areas of Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver, where journalists tend to make more links to American representations of gang life. In some cases, I was ashamed—as someone who has been trained as both a scholar and a journalist—that reporters would so easily revert to middle-class stereotypes of marginalized youth and condemn certain groups without any apparent critical thought about the broader social issues that affect these communities. I was also deeply troubled by those who used the threat of gangs to help pass political policies that would never have gone through if a sizable number of the population were not stripped of a voice or scared into silence.

Thankfully, such troublesome practices are not the norm in Canadian journalism. Though all reporters could benefit from more frequent self-reflection, the harsher criticisms do not apply to every journalist. Many intelligent, devoted, and passionate journalists fill the newsrooms of the major dailies in the country. Critical academic works rarely mention these reporters (I'm only really acknowledging them in a preface). I want to highlight, however, as much for the benefit of readers as for the benefit of my conscience, that journalists perform a tougher task, under rougher conditions, and with less cultural and financial reward than most academics care to acknowledge. For this reason, people like me owe them a world of debt.

For as long as I have been in university, I have been conscious of a tendency among scholars to belittle journalists' efforts and to reproach 700-word articles for not being all-encompassing or theoretically advanced enough. In some cases, this critique may be appropriate. When critics extend it, however, as a blanket statement encompassing all journalists and media channels, the critique becomes vague, condescending, and simply poor scholarship. Those who dismiss mainstream news *tout court* fail to engage in dialogues with journalists and, consequently, they close off any possibility for meaningful interventions into the way stories are told and information circulates. In this study, I look primarily at the texts journalists have produced and not what they have to say about those texts. A crucial part of future work will be to pursue many of the questions I raise with journalists, including them in discussions and allowing them to think about and respond to my findings. Unfortunately, their voices and perspectives will be a significant aspect of the next project. Before such engagements can be meaningfully conducted, I believe it is important to critically assess the terrain of representations, which is my focus in the following chapters.

Ironically, many of the same critics who condemn reporters' practices as hegemonic, ideological, or simply unsophisticated owe their own understandings of such issues to journalists like Friesen, who venture into demanding environments and distil complex situations into brief, informative accounts, stripped of professional jargon and pretention, often with only a few hours before a deadline. Without these individuals, only ancient historians and natural scientists could continue their work relatively unchanged. Critical scholars must challenge the simplistic tropes and stereotypes that can develop, particularly in selective and uninformed accounts of social issues. I believe, however,

they must also acknowledge the efforts of journalists who have neither the luxury of time nor the comfort of an academic position. For this reason, I would like to thank the thoughtful and self-reflexive journalists in Canada who uphold high professional standards. These journalists continue to provide scholars with much of the raw material from which we attempt to understand our societies. When I criticise some of the ways journalists portray race, class, gender, and space/place in relation to crime in Canada, I do so with a profound appreciation of the efforts these individuals make every day while I'm reading at my desk or standing behind a lectern.

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1. Mediating Canadian Ganglands: An Overview

A lot more research has been undertaken about street gangs...At the same time, more attempts have been undertaken at gang control...And despite these two changes, more misinformation about street gangs has been spread and accentuated, thanks principally to portrayals in the media—the movies, television, and the written press. (Klein, 2007, p. 49)

Someone, at any rate, should do a sociological analysis of what's happening in the field of journalism, and its political implications. Maybe someone like Bourdieu could do it. (Deleuze, 1990, p. 27)¹

What I'm giving here is simultaneously a balance sheet based on a number of studies and a program for further research. (Bourdieu, 1998a, p. 50)

Emerging Ganglands

Before Vancouver became “Canada’s gang capital” (Stueck & Hyslop, 2009, p. A1) and before Toronto’s “elementary school grounds” converted to “nighttime killing fields” (Leeder & Powell, 2005, p. A1), Frederic Thrasher (1927/1963) published a book called *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*. While previous researchers sought biological and psychological explanations of young delinquent groups, this University of Chicago professor developed the first major sociological analysis of gangs in North

¹ I would like to thank Glen Whelan (2002) for pointing me to this prescient statement.

America.² He spent seven years getting to know the young men who gathered on street corners, engaging in acts of petty larceny and violence, forming bonds with one another, and finding identity in an environment that generally ignored their thoughts and desires.

Thrasher (1927/1963) posited that gangs emerge spontaneously as play groups that become solidified through conflict. “Not only does the gang boy transform his sordid environment through his imagination, but he lives among soldiers and knights, pirates and banditti” (p. 85). These fairly innocent exploits, however, escalate to violent crime when assemblages of young men seek more excitement. “Junking leads to petty stealing. ‘Going robbing’ is a common diversion in the gang and this often develops into more serious types of burglary and robbery with a gun” (p. 269). Thrasher refused to acknowledge a “gang instinct” *per se*, but he asserted that gangs will continue to thrive where social organizations and community supports lag behind the growth of a city.

Alongside Thrasher, researchers associated with the Chicago School engaged in myriad studies of marginalized groups during this period. Robert Park became a founding member of the group after working for more than a decade as a journalist. He argued that “we need such studies, if for no other reason than to enable us to read the newspapers intelligently” (Park, 1925/1984, p. 3). Like Thrasher, Park and his associates conceived of gangs as fulfilling a socializing function where other institutions like schools, churches, and the family did not. In 1925, Park and Burgess published *The City*, a series of influential essays demonstrating how Chicago had become the “laboratory” within

² While earlier works that use the term “gang” exist, such as Puffer’s (1912/2008) *The Boy and his Gang*, the majority of scholars cite Thrasher as the founder of contemporary gang research (e.g., Cummings & Monti, 1993; Curry & Decker, 1998; Klein, 1995, 2007; Klein & Maxson, 2010; Hagedorn, 2007; Huff, 1990, 1996, 2002; Miller, Maxson, & Klein, 2001; Spergel, 1993, 1995; Wortley & Tanner, 2004).

which their associates—including Thrasher—carried out “studies on social forces in community life” (Burgess, 1925/1984, p. 143). Deploying an ecological development model of the city, the Chicago scholars argued that the closer one ventured into the inner city, the more precarious the area’s cultural, economic, and social dynamic would appear (Figure 1.1). The smorgasbord of groups operating in the centre of the city, primarily recently immigrated, working-class families, formed an interstitial space with less solidified social norms and expectations. This geographical arrangement, in turn, led gangs to form as organic social institutions. In the middle-class suburbs, where organizations like the school, the church, and the family were more solidified and well-defined, fewer gangs were active.

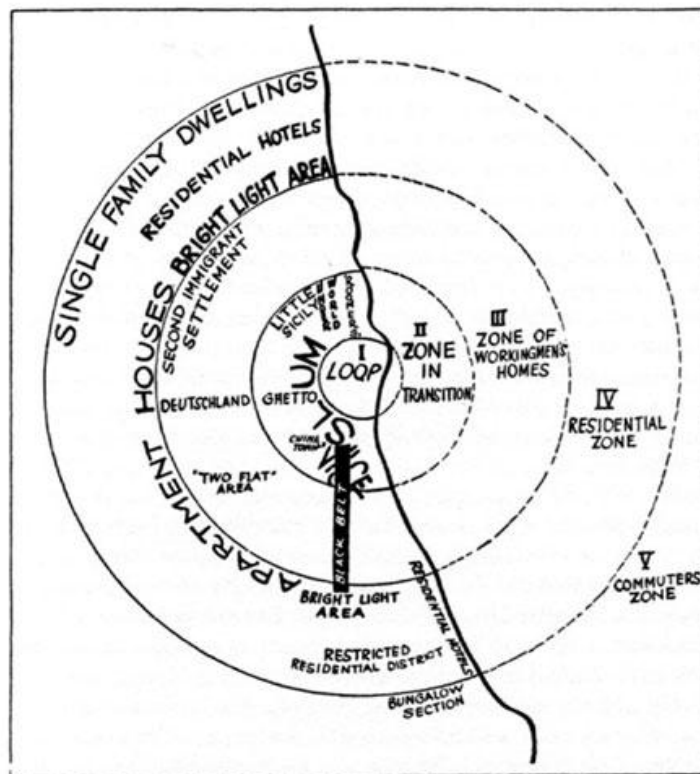


Figure 1.1: Burgess’ (1925/1984) concentric circle diagram, used also in Thrasher’s (1927/1963) study (he shaded in the centre-left area to indicate the presence of gangs).

As many scholars (e.g., Dimitriadis, 2006; Platt, 1977; Rothman, 1980) have subsequently pointed out, the arguments of the Chicago School presuppose a set of normalizing assumptions about the superiority of white, middle-class values. Nevertheless, research continues to support the assertion that social disorganization, poverty, and neglected youth often leads to deviance and gang formation. The Chicago School's lasting legacy represents the beginnings of contemporary gang research (Hoffmann, 2003; Pratt & Cullen, 2005; Sampson & Groves, 1989, Veysey & Messner, 1999).

Urban populations in North America skyrocketed in the early to mid-twentieth century, as did the slums, tenement houses, and criminal elements of these metropolises. In the next few decades, numerous gang studies surfaced in the United States, where waves of Eastern-European settlers and former African-American slaves from the south took up residence in cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York. In Canada, cities like Toronto and Montreal also grew rapidly. The local newspapers there too printed accounts of gangs robbing, stealing, and killing on the streets ("Gunmen Obtain \$8,000," 1940; "Police Capture Gang," 1941). North of the border, however, no Chicago School equivalent existed that methodically studied this phenomenon on a large scale. While McGill University attained Carl Dawson, who had worked under Burgess and Park in Chicago, the spark never seemed to catch like it did in Chicago (Shore, 1987).³ Consequently, gang studies in Canada have been much less systematic and prolific (Wortley & Tanner, 2004).

³ Dawson helped develop the country's first sociology department at McGill University. However, as Shore (1987) notes, financial trouble and the influence of English sociology greatly impeded any developments on the scale of the Chicago School in Canada.

In the 1960s and 1970s, trends in the global economy brought larger numbers of immigrants and refugees from developing countries in Africa and South Asia to North America, the majority of whom settled in major cities (Angelini & Broderick, 2003; Driedger, 1996; Hiller, 2005). In Canada, domestic policies that encouraged multiculturalism and immigration, mixed with political unrest and natural disasters abroad, meant significant influxes of new Canadians from Cambodia, Haiti, Jamaica, Somalia, and Vietnam (Bunting, Filion, & Walker, 2010). Many families with young children entered an economic and cultural situation for which they were ill prepared. Federal administrations since Trudeau have appeared happy to increase the number of low-wage workers filling service and labour positions; however, these governments have failed to provide adequate assistance for integration, resulting in what a number of authors have called a vertical mosaic of raised and lowered tiles (Fleras, 2009; Porter, 1965). During this period, reports of criminal street gangs proliferated within the news media. As I explore in the next section, however, such terms remain ambiguous within public discourses, and can mean many different things.

Despite antecedents that extend back hundreds of years in North America, more recent press accounts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries positioned gangs as emerging overnight in pockets of the Canadian urban landscape, particularly in ethnically diverse, low-income neighbourhoods like East Hastings, Jane-Finch, Scarborough, and Montréal-Nord. By the end of the twentieth century, burgeoning gang research, emerging mainly from the United States, struggled to make sense of what seemed to be a plunge into gratuitous crime and wanton violence among the youths of the continent. The most prevalent North American media coverage focused on Los Angeles's Crips and

Bloods feud, which fit into a simple narrative of two distinct groups vying for territory (Bender, 2009; Bing, 1991; Davenport, 2009; Klein & Maxson, 2010; Miller, Maxson, & Klein, 2001). Don Gillmor (2007) argues that Canadians saw gangs in their own cities through the lens of this highly publicised spectacle. “Most have experienced the Crips and Bloods only through film and TV, as a fictional construct, a grittier version of *West Side Story*’s Sharks and Jets” (p. 92). Like many writers (Cummings & Monti, 1993; Curry & Decker, 1998; Klein, 1995, 2007; Klein & Maxson, 2010; Huff, 1990, 1996, 2002; Miller, Maxson, & Klein, 2001), Gillmor argues that diverse media outlets work to construct and reinforce the image of gangs in North America today. Consequently, I draw on media such as television, music, film, and photography to interrogate the words and images within daily print reporting in Canada, making this study multidisciplinary in relation to both its content and its critical theoretical frameworks.

Contemporary criminologists continue to cultivate a growing body of knowledge about gangs. Scholars have generally put an end to several myths: 1) graffiti is gang-related;⁴ 2) stricter laws curb gang violence;⁵ or 3) gangs spend most of their time fighting, stealing, and selling drugs.⁶ At the same time, research supports other notions:

⁴ Only a small percentage of the graffiti one sees on the street is gang-related. Despite popular misconceptions, gang members generally spend a negligible amount of their time spray-painting or tagging their neighbourhoods; in fact, today most serious criminal gangs are smart enough to know that bragging about crimes on city walls is not a wise move and they avoid doing this (Rahn, 2002; Walsh, 1996; Young, 2005)

⁵ Despite many politicians’ rhetorical claims and government initiatives, virtually all gang scholars insist that “tough-on-crime” policies not only fail to stop gangs but often strengthen and solidify them (see Cummings & Monti, 1993; Curry & Decker, 1998; Klein, 1995, 2007; Klein & Maxson, 2010; Hagedorn, 2007; Huff, 1990, 1996, 2002; Miller, Maxson, & Klein, 2001; Spergel, 1993, 1995; Wortley & Tanner, 2004).

⁶ Gang life is often quite banal. “Customary activities are sleeping, eating and hanging around” writes Klein (1995, p. 29). “Most gang members’ behaviour is not criminal, and most gang members’ crimes are not violent. And of course, most violent people are not gang members so it’s not very useful to define gangs in terms of violent crime alone” (ibid).

1) “bad neighbourhoods” house more gang members than others;⁷ 2) ethnic and racial minorities are more likely to join gangs;⁸ and 3) gang membership is a significant health hazard.⁹ Nevertheless, one might be surprised at how little is known about gangs in North America.

A major problem is that many intellectuals weigh in briefly on gangs, but few pursue questions over the long term. Malcolm W. Klein (2007) recently observed that “the number of scholars who have stayed genuinely engaged in gang research and policy throughout their careers can be counted on one hand” (pp. ix-x).¹⁰ Klein is one of the few academics to remain in the field, having spent nearly half a century attempting to understand gangs.¹¹ He details his observations in *Chasing After Street Gangs: A Forty-Year Journey*, asking “why, when eighty years have passed since Frederic Thrasher introduced gangs to the worlds of research, policy, and practice, are we not further along in melding our increasing knowledge with expanding options in practice?” (Klein, 2007, p. ix). One key stumbling block, he argues, is the lacking consensus on what constitutes a

⁷ A significantly higher proportion of youth (10-15 per cent) are gang members within gang territories as opposed to 1-2 per cent of city youth generally (Klein, 2007).

⁸ According to the 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs, gangs were comprised nationally of African Canadian/Black, 25%, First Nations, 22 %, Caucasian/White, 18%, East Indian/Pakistani, 14%, and Asian, 12 % (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003). However, as I argue later in this study, these numbers cannot be accepted uncritically. If nothing else, they point to the way in which police officers view gangs in Canada, not necessarily the actual numbers of gang members.

⁹ Chettleburgh (2007) argues that “the chance of dying today for a Canadian street-gang member is more than ten times that of U.S. soldiers who served in Vietnam” (p. 45). His math may be questionable, but the idea that gang members have a greater likelihood of victimization is supported throughout the literature (Cummings & Monti, 1993; Curry & Decker, 1998; Klein, 1995, 2007; Klein & Maxson, 2010; Hagedorn, 2007; Huff, 1990, 1996, 2002; Miller, Maxson, & Klein, 2001; Spergel, 1993, 1995; Wortley & Tanner, 2004).

¹⁰ In Canada, this number is even lower. Few scholars, if any, have remained gang researchers in this country. While many Canadian authors have written on the subject (see Bruckert & Parent, 2004; Caputo & Vallée 2005; Carrington, 2002; Chatterjee, 2006; Dowler, 2004; Dubois, 2002, 2003; Dubro, 1985; Fasiolo & Leckie, 1993; Gordon, 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Schneider, 2009; Symons, 1999; Totten, 2008; Wortley & Tanner, 2004), it is unclear whether any would self-identify primarily as a “gang scholar.”

¹¹ The others, he writes, are Jim Short, Walter Miller, and Irv Spergel (Klein, 2007, p. x). To this list, I would also add Scott Cummings, Scott H. Decker, John M. Hagedorn, and C. Ronald Huff.

gang. Despite the history of scholarship, researchers, politicians, and law enforcement officials have found it virtually impossible to establish clear and common answers to the questions: What is a gang? What signifies a gang crime? And who constitutes a gang member? While I make no pretensions to hold the definitive answers to these questions, in the next section I turn to antecedents and historical uses of the term to better understand the concept's development.

From “Gangr” to “Gangsta”: A Brief History of Gang Discourses

The term “gang” entered the English language around the 1500s. This is not to say such groups appeared overnight, however. Throughout history, certain youths have upset older citizens wherever they have appeared. In the eighth century B.C., Hesiod bemoaned the “frivolous” young people who were all “reckless beyond words” (quoted in Levine, 2007, p. xiii). Socrates hated certain youths, whom he argued “now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority” (quoted in Tapscott, 2009, p. 305). The term “gang” comes from “gangon” and originally meant “to go” (Cresswell, 2011).¹² Making its way from Old Norse (*gangr*) to Old English (*gang*), by the early seventeenth century it began to denote a set of things that go together. Eventually, English speakers referred to groups, primarily sailors or workmen, as gangs. Soon after, the word acquired negative connotations as these groups became known for engaging in illicit and immoral activities, drinking, philandering, and fighting wherever they went.

¹² In Scotland, some people still use phrases like “gang to your room,” evoking this sense of the word. Famed Scottish poet Robert Burns (1820) was no stranger to this usage either, exclaiming that “freedom and Whisky gang thegither!” (p. 27)

The origin of gangs as they are known today varies between scholars, with one popular timeframe being Europe's Early Modern period (circa. 1400-1700 AD) (Covey, 2010; Cummings & Monti, 1993; Franzese, Covey, & Menard, 2006; Hagedorn, 2007; Klein, 1995; Spergel, 1993, 1995; Shelden, Tracy, & Brown, 2001). Pearson (1983) gives an account of "organised gangs" in the 1600s who amused themselves by "breaking windows, demolishing taverns, assaulting the Watch, attacking wayfarers and slitting the noses of their victims with swords, rolling old ladies in barrels, and other violent frolics" (p. 188). Elsewhere in history, related groups called "thugs," "hooligans," and "hoodlums" have occupied the minds of concerned citizens, each with their own unique genealogy, which Dash (2006), Pearson (1983), and Van Deburg (2004) explore respectively.

In the seventeenth century, European gangs entered North America in the guise of pirates and privateers who operated across the eastern seaboard (Schneider, 2009). The term "gangplank" entered popular usage not long after this period, as did the term "press gang." The latter practice, which has actually existed since medieval times, refers to the seizure of those who possess sailing skills by the state. Most notably, the British navy deployed this technique in the eighteenth century, forcing many citizens to work its ships while providing little more than food, shelter, and a respite from beatings in return (Gwyn, 2003; Ennis, 2002; Land, 2009). While relatively little is written on the press gang in a Canadian context, Mercer (2010) and Gwyn (2003) provide two detailed accounts of the experience in British North America.



Figure 1.2: This 1780 caricature of a press gang depicts the British Navy forcing citizens to work for them.

In the mid-nineteenth century, long before Los Angeles gangstas became infamous in California, journalists and other writers began to glamourize bands of young men who terrorized the west. Legends of Butch Cassidy and the Hole-in-the-Wall Gang, the James-Younger Gang, and similar groups quickly spread as books such as Augustus Appler's (1876) *The Guerrillas of the West* and James Buel's *The Border Outlaws* (1882) became immensely popular among the growing literate population. Eastern cities like New York and Toronto also held many urban gangs, as Martin Scorsese recently showed a new

generation of cinephiles with *Gangs of New York* (2002), which he based on Herbert Asbury's 1927 book.¹³

During this time, yellow journalism, exemplified by Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, published articles on violent gangs, holding a fascination for "unusual murder weapons—including a nail, a coffin lid, a red-hot horse-shoe, an umbrella, a matchbox, and a teakettle" (Brian, 2001, p. 67). Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) point out that Pulitzer and many editors attempted to reform their newspapers by the 1920s. "As the immigrants of the 1890s moved into the middle class of the twentieth century, the sensationalism of yellow journalism gave way to a more sober approach" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 193). Upon close examination, however, the subtle roots of yellow journalism and its attraction to gangs and violent crimes still resonate in the media landscape of the twenty-first century (Campbell, 2001; Kooistra & Mahoney, 2009; Spencer, 2007; Tovares, 2002; Wood, 2003).

In the early twentieth century, prohibition redrew the gang line in North America. Canada, in particular, earned a reputation for providing illicit drink.¹⁴ "The label 'Canadian' on whiskey is proof that the product is unadulterated—a tradition from the continental rum running days of the 1920s and 1930s," writes Cheryl Krasnick Warsh (1993, p. 5). During this period, popular media discourses blurred the distinction between criminal gangs and venerable business associates. Eminent families linked to bootlegging

¹³ Journalist Herbert Asbury's *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (1927/2008) details notorious gangs like The Dead Rabbits, The Plug Uglies, and the Bowery Bois at the turn of the century.

¹⁴ In Canada, alcohol laws varied (as they still do) from province to province. At one point, the majority of Canada was dry, with only a majority of Quebec politicians voting to allow alcohol consumption (Warsh, 1993).

like the Bronfmans, the Kennedys, and the Seagrams were also respected citizens and prominent figures in political circles (Okrent, 2010; Schneider, 2009). “The forerunners of today’s drug barons and money launderers were not underworld figures but respectable merchant banks and brokerage houses,” writes Behr (1996, p. 130). This does not mean everyone approved of such practices; some publications reported that politicians were in an “unholy partnership with a gang of millionaire bootleggers” (de Brisay, 1926, p. 213). Love them or hate them, however, the image of the gangster changed considerably in the early nineteenth century, transforming from the shadowy figure lurking in the inner-city alleyway to the tailored-suit-wearing businessman crunching numbers in the financial district. By the time of his death in 1947, American bootlegger and gangster Al Capone was a household name, providing the quintessential image of the American gangster (Fig. 1.3).

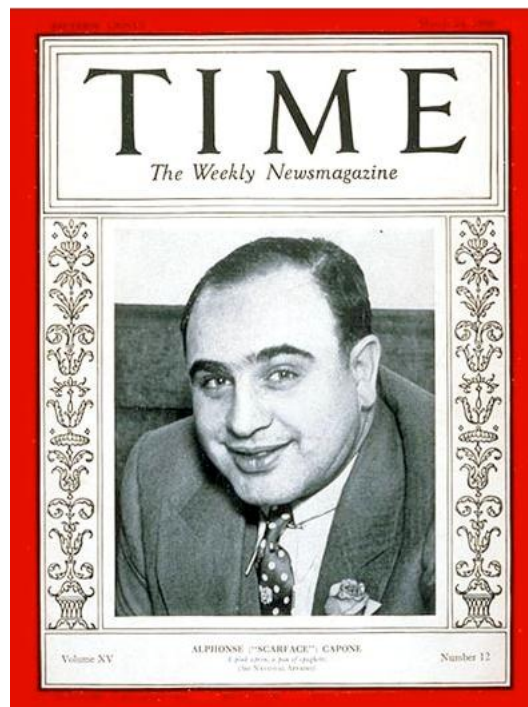


Figure 1.3: Al Capone was an iconic figure by the time of his death in 1947, representing a new kind of American gangster.

While I do not focus specifically on gender in this work, I believe it is important to acknowledge that women have always played a role in gang culture. Only in recent history, however, have they appeared in mainstream scholarship. From the pirates who terrorized the seas before Canada was a nation to the young men who congregated in urban alleyways in the early twentieth century, gang members have relied primarily on physical strength, chauvinism, and machismo for social status. Traditional masculinity was taken very seriously by these groups and the most minor slight would be met with violence in order to restore respect. This tradition continues in many guises today, and its prominence in gang culture has largely overshadowed the less-visible participation of female gang members in North America. Legends circulate, however, of Hell-Cat Maggie who fought with her filed teeth and brass fingernails alongside the Dead Rabbits in nineteenth-century New York (Asbury, 1927/2008).¹⁵ Thrasher (1927/1963) mentions female gang members who were granted entrée for their sexual favours in Chicago during the 1920s. And Whyte (1943/1981) details the Aphrodite Club, which caused trouble in the 1930s. But only in the late-twentieth century has the theme of gangs and gender led to sustained research efforts such as Campbell's (1984) *The Girls in the Gang*, Moore's (1991) *Going Down to the Barrio: Homeboys and Homegirls in Change*, and Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn's *Female Gangs in America: Essays on Girls, Gangs, and Gender* (1999). By 2002, Miller argues that "it is no longer accurate to say that female involvement in youth gangs is an understudied phenomenon" (p. 175). These studies have found that women join gangs for myriad reasons, some entering as mere hangers-on,

¹⁵ Asbury (1927/2008) writes that "When Hell-Cat Maggie screeched her battle cry and rushed biting and clawing into the midst of a mass of opposing gangsters, even the most stout-hearted blanched and fled" (pp. 27-28).

others taking active roles in the criminal exploits of the groups. Frequently, however, the risk of victimization increases for female gang members from both within the gang and outside it (Dorraais & Corriveau, 2009; Nimmo, 2001; Nurge, 2003).

The last transformation of gangs in recent history has stemmed from the inner-city drug battles of the 1980s and 1990s, during which time crack sales skyrocketed, rap music flourished, and the “hood film cycle” showed cinema-goers a fascinating world of gangstas and racial tensions that captured the imaginations of many young viewers (Richardson & Skott-Myhre, 2012). The central cultural phenomenon to emerge from this period was hip hop (Dyson, 2007; Rose, 2008; West, 2008). Growing out of the Bronx in the 1970s, hip hop unofficially hit the mainstream when the top-selling album in 1991 became N.W.A.’s *Niggaz4Life*, featuring L.A. Gangstas Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, and Eazy-E (Samuels, 1992). Young men in the white suburbs of North America in particular began devouring these violent, profanity-laced tracks, which told stories of African-American criminal groups and their street cultures. By the 1990s, gangsta rap and terms like gang bangin’ and O.G. (Original Gangsta) entered common parlance among many youths, giving the concept of gangs particular racial connotations. Since then, hip-hop themes of underclass resistance and subcultural pride have spread to Montreal (Low, Sarkar, Winer, 2009), France (Orlando, 2003), and Eastern Europe (Dyson, 2007; Drissel, 2012), producing, at best, an inspirational message of hope for marginalized communities, and, at worst, a glamorization of violence, misogyny, and material consumption associated with the modern gangsta.

Race is clearly an important element within these mediated gang representations. In the following chapters, I primarily focus on discursive problems, metaphorical language,

and political rhetoric, touching on the ways in which race can become enmeshed in these linguistic issues, but not concentrating specifically on race as a central theme. In part, I take this position because many other scholars have explored race in greater detail (Chan & Mirchandani, 2002; Franzese, Covey, & Menard, 2006; Gabbidon & Greene, 2008; Gabbidon, 2010; Garfield, 2010; Hagedorn, 2007, 2008; Knox, 2000; van Gemert, Peterson, & Lien, 2008; Walker, Spohn, & Delone, 2011). Today, gang scholars generally understand that racism and oppression can lead visible minority groups to form gangs, but not all gangs form on the basis of race—in fact, many gangs today comprise multiple ethnic and racial groups (Klein, 1995, 2007; Klein & Maxson, 2010; Klein, Kerner, Maxson, & Weitekamp, 2000; Schneider, 2009; Spergel, 1995; van Gemert, Peterson, & Lien, 2008). Nevertheless, popular media representations tend to present well-defined, often black or Latino, groups as “gangs” to the exclusion of white and European members. Statistical evidence that supports assertions that most gang members are Black, Latino, or First Nations can also be heavily biased.¹⁶ Thus, whether real or constructed, race plays an important role not only in gang formation and solidification, but also in whom reporters and the general public understand to be gang members. Because it is such a prominent issue in gang studies, race is impossible to ignore, and, indeed I consider race among other themes in the following chapters. For more detailed analyses directed at the role of race in gangs, I encourage readers to examine the

¹⁶ For instance, as Maxson and Klein (1990) demonstrate, the Los Angeles Police Department measured twice as many gang crimes using their definition than what they would have found using the Chicago Police Department’s definition. This problem is not unique to The United States. Like most data sets on gangs, these are based on police observations and opinions. As Klein and Maxson (2010) observe, “the information upon which so much gang control policy relies may be as much a reflection of law enforcement activity and recording practices as it is of gang activity” (p. 54).

following sources, which provide a solid foundation and relevant context on the issue: Chan & Mirchandani (2002); Franzese, Covey, & Menard (2006); Gabbidon & Greene (2008); Gabbidon (2010); Garfield (2010); Hagedorn (2007, 2008) ; Knox (2000); van Gemert, Peterson, & Lien (2008); Walker, Spohn, & Delone (2011).

This brief history of gang discourses demonstrates that groups of young outlaws stealing, fighting, and asserting their wills have captured the interests of citizens for centuries, dating back at least as far as Ancient Greece. Gangs continue to provide compelling subjects for books, films, and newspapers. Because most people are not exposed to gangs in their personal lives, the representations of these groups are particularly important for understanding contemporary legal, political, and social discourses. As Bourdieu (1982/2010) writes, representations have the “power to produce existence by producing the collectively recognized, and thus realized” (p. 42). This symbolic power is perhaps most evident in the contemporary print news coverage of gangs, which situates individuals within a language that has the power to celebrate, condemn, romanticize, or stigmatize.

The representations of gangs that journalists disseminate are crucial to understanding how Canadians perceive and address such groups. Thus, my object of study will be “gang” as signifier—not “gang” as signified. This decision allows me to probe the way G-A-N-G appears within daily print journalism without being drawn into a debate about the objects to which such representations refer. In short, I am concerned

with the representation, not the represented.¹⁷ I think it is important to highlight this distinction from the outset. Assessing the flesh and blood individuals whom one may encounter gathered on street corners, congregating in drug dens, or loitering in suburban strip malls is not the focus of the current study. Instead, I seek to interrogate the signifying practices that inform readers about what gangs are, how they operate, and what to watch out for. To better explain this situation, I turn to the theoretical framework of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

Pierre Bourdieu: Symbolic Violence and the Canadian Media

Pierre Bourdieu is good to think with. Jenkins (2002) repeats this assessment throughout his critical look at Bourdieu's work. Whether or not one agrees with Bourdieu's vision of the social world, it is difficult to deny this statement. His is a provocative and rigorous starting point for critical analysis, whether it is of the media, the arts, the university, or any other field. Numerous authors have since taken up Jenkins's opinion (Bieber, 1999; Goodman & Silverstein, 2009; Grenfell, 2008; Grenfell et al., 1998; Hage, 1994; James, 2001; Jarvie & Maguire, 1994; Lamont, Forthcoming; Lizardo, 2012; Park, 2009; Reed-Danahay, 2005; Wainwright, Williams, Turner, 2006). I tend to agree with them.

Simply put, Bourdieu draws attention to common-sense presuppositions, asks you to look at them closely, and then not only will he tell you *what* you missed but also *why* you missed it. With only a handful of recurring conceptual tools (e.g., symbolic violence, habitus, field), Bourdieu has written books that apply this exercise to education

¹⁷ In making this choice, I am not asserting that real-life gangs do not exist or that they are merely discursive constructions. An interrogation of the lived practices of such groups, however, is beyond the scope of this research.

(1964/1979 (with Passeron); 1970/2000 (with Passeron); 1984/1988, 1989/1996, 1997/2000), art and culture (1965/1990, 1966/1990, 1979/1984, 1992/1996), gender relations (1998/2001), language (1982/2010), and, perhaps most importantly for my current undertaking, news media (1998a, 1998b, 2002). In this section, I examine some of the main conceptual tools Bourdieu provides and how I will use them in the following chapters.

Bourdieu distinguishes himself from postmodern theoreticians by centring his arguments on evidence-based research. However, each of his studies meticulously theorizes its objects of analysis, particularly in relation to how they are constructed, represented, understood, and interpreted throughout the process. In this way, Bourdieu provides a powerful framework for critique, one rich in theoretical sophistication as well as practical utility. Ultimately, with knowledge of symbolic violence, habitus, and field, I demonstrate that journalists can improve their crime reporting techniques significantly. In each of the following chapters, I elaborate these techniques, often with the addition of a scholar or theorist from a relevant field, first by examining what recent Canadian publications actually say about gangs and then by developing a critical interpretation of such texts and interrogating them in relation to cultural, political, and artistic discourses.

Symbolic Violence

Symbolic violence occurs when groups impose a single, specific meaning as legitimate “by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 4). Using Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence, I question journalistic practices that take a diverse range of possibilities and force one dominant

representation. Throughout the history of gangs, relatively privileged individuals—those with the cultural, financial, and social capital to earn university degrees and enter the industry as producers, reporters, and editors—have been the ones representing those on the other end of the social spectrum. In the case of gangs, the majority of mainstream journalists acknowledge only particular viewpoints and position them as universal, centring debates on a limited number of questions as if they were the only appropriate ones to pose.

The mainstream news media often enter into relationships in which predominantly white, middle-class, cultured individuals—the kind who might see a Leonard Bernstein play on the weekend—report on young, minority groups that lack the economic and cultural resources to represent themselves to a wider public. Gangs can evoke many of the characteristics that appeal to mass audiences: risk, simplification, violence, visual spectacle, youth.¹⁸ Consequently, coverage of gangs in contemporary journalism is intense, producing very specific gendered and racial discourses that vilify young black males more than any other group (Hall et al., 1978; Mercer, 1994; Van Deburg, 2004).

In news stories on gangs, as in many other situations, journalists present the views of police officers and criminal attorneys most prominently (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1989; Fishman, 1980). Based on these sources, articles tend to emphasize criminal issues, leaving aside other concerns such as failing schools, underfunded community programs, and discriminatory urban planning policies. At the same time, journalists tend to exclude the views of citizens who hold tacit, experiential knowledge of the issues and quote higher-ranking officials instead. This practice of relying on the opinions of law

¹⁸ I have adapted these factors from Jewkes's (2011) list of crime news values.

enforcement and political commentators may seem obvious to the average reader; however, such framings erase many questions that consequently seem to fall outside the scope of legitimate debate. Such questions might include, Which citizens are deserving of protection? Who are these individuals and what causes them to form gangs and commit crimes? How do *they* view the situation? And what cultural, economic, and social precedents have helped generate such groups? Instead, the main problems become, How fast can gang members be arrested? Do police have adequate funding? and, Which politicians are brave enough to stop them and protect hard-working, decent citizens?

Bourdieu (1990) writes that symbolic power is most evident in the ability to produce scapegoats, stereotypes, and subordinate groups. To best accomplish this task, those exercising symbolic power need two things: first, they need to possess symbolic capital (the power to impose social divisions on the minds of others); and second, they need these groups to exist, to some degree, in reality (i.e., there must be some resemblance of truth to any claims). In this case, most citizens will agree that gangs exist. But whether journalists describe them as “super predators” or “victims of social neglect,” as Gilliam and Iyengar (2005) point out, relies greatly on those who hold the power to legitimate certain discourses and negate others. Journalists often become what Hall et al. (1978) call “secondary definers;” that is, they do not create the talking points but provide a medium for “primary definers” (politicians, lawyers, police, etc.) to voice their opinions. As secondary definers, journalists package the information for readers, but they do not produce it. As Bourdieu (1998a) argues, “symbolic violence is a violence wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents, insofar as both remain

unconscious of submitting to or wielding it” (p. 17). In some ways, journalists are both victims and villains when it comes to representing gangs.

Habitus

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus allows me to explore the interpretations and divisions of objects in the social world by examining the unconscious mechanisms through which individuals and groups categorize and understand their environment. Bourdieu (1979/1984) defines habitus as “the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products” (p. 170). In essence, habitus is a cyclical—but alterable—series of behaviours that determine how individuals see and act within specific settings. When presented with violent youths on the streets of Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver, for example, a journalist will quickly run through a number of questions: *Is this like something I’ve personally experienced before? If not, where have I seen this: Boyz N the Hood (1991)? Juice (1992)? West Side Story (1961)? What stands out about these groups to me? Who do I know who could comment on them: A gang member? A politician? A professor?*

The journalist will not necessarily be conscious of this internal monologue, but her responses will guide her story and the decisions she makes while preparing and writing it. Here, Bourdieu (1972/2007) argues that each production “is as remote from a creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from a simple mechanical reproduction of the initial conditionings” (p. 95). In other words, one’s habitus is not mechanical; researchers cannot predict the outcome of each story based on the person’s position in the world. But the journalist’s social position nevertheless reveals itself in the product. As Bourdieu

(1998a) writes, “if I want to find out what one or another journalist is going to say or write, or will find obvious or unthinkable, normal or worthless, I have to know the position that journalist occupies in this space” (p. 41). Conversely, one can interpret the underlying presumptions of the writer and her position within society through the choices she makes when classifying and representing others, which will seem completely natural to her and anyone else who shares her capacities to interpret and categorize objects in the same way. To researchers well-trained in self-reflexivity and notions of positionality, however, such work will reveal a habitus that lies under the surface of such seemingly natural representations, illuminating affiliations, distinctions, social positions, and many other likely—but not fixed or inevitable—characteristics of the writer.

Field

While I am primarily concerned with the field of journalism, Bourdieu’s interrogation of how different fields combine to inform one’s worldview is a crucial aspect of my study. The field is a network of objective relations between actors competing in a specific milieu. This notion is a fundamental feature of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. “While habitus consists of a set of historical relations ‘deposited’ within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciations, and action,” Bourdieu argues, “a field consists of a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital)” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 16). In the following chapters, I examine how the fields of cinema (Chapter Three), federal politics (Chapter Four), urban planning (Chapter Five), and art (Chapter Six) intersect with what Benson and Neveu (2005) term the journalistic field; that is, the space

in which journalists compete over symbolic capital and positions of power within the industry.

While I am concerned with how this industry operates, it is important to note that this study is not situated within a political-economic framework through which I might attempt to understand the media by its ownership.¹⁹ As Bourdieu (1998a) writes, “if you know only the name of the owner of a television station, its advertising budget, and how much it receives in subsidies, you wouldn’t know much” (p. 16). Instead, this study focuses on the cultural slippages and linguistic games that journalists—wittingly and unwittingly—display in relation to crime coverage. Through these culturally taken-for-granted assumptions, I analyse the habitus and cultural capital revealed within depictions of gangs in the journalistic field.

Through endless headlines, broadcasts, and popular fictional portrayals, Canadians construct a cultural understanding of what the term “gang” signifies. Public opinion, to borrow Lippmann’s (1921/2007) terminology, comes not from “reality” but from the “pictures in our heads” (p. 9). While virtually everyone has an opinion on gangs, few have experienced theft, robbery, or violence at the hands of gangs in Canada and fewer still have been members of these groups.²⁰ An important element within this

¹⁹ Authors such as Hanno Hardt (1992, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2008) and Robert McChesney (1997, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2002, 2010) provide quite detailed overviews of political-economic perspectives in journalism and mass media.

²⁰ In 2009, Canada witnessed 124 gang-related homicides (dropping from 138 the year before) according to Statistics Canada (2010). In Toronto, with the most gangs of any Canadian city, 30 gang-related deaths occurred. In relation to other gang-related offenses, the numbers remain relatively unimpressive; considering that the city has a population of more than three million, these numbers are quite low. In terms of membership, the 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs suggests there are 434 active youth gangs with more than 7,000 members. However, when the only criterion for gang membership is that someone in the community claims the existence of a gang member, the results may not necessarily reflect a coherent understanding of the picture (see critique below).

analysis is therefore probing journalism's reliance on other fields that help to construct such pictures in our heads. As Bourdieu (1998a) argues, "the journalistic field has one distinguishing characteristic: it is much more dependent on external forces than the other fields in cultural production" (p. 53). If one recognizes the factors that condition certain gang representations in the mainstream news media, then it follows that one could change these conditions by drawing attention to the underlying assumptions and schemes of perception that construct these practices as they mesh with other fields.

To highlight this interplay, let us examine the connection between newspapers and cinema. Frequently, journalists simply name the film or television show they think best fits their stories. Headlines announce: "Gravel gives 'Godfather' system black eye" (Arpin, 1989, p. B6); "Boyz N the Hood violence claims second life" (n.a., 1991, p. C2); "West Side Story got it right" (Dyer, 1999, p. A6); and "Real cops tap into The Wire" (Krauskopf, 2008, p. C5).

Within articles, journalists also frequently use films to describe crimes:

It was like a scene from a gangster movie that might star Al Pacino. In fact, Mr. Pacino himself was up on the screen, playing a Mafioso hit man, when a gunman wearing a black ski-mask calmly walked up and started pumping bullets into a movie-goer in a suburban Vancouver cinema. (Haysom, 1997, p. A4)

The Correctional Service of Canada charter that ferries convicted murderers, rapists and drug dealers from prison to prison across the country four times a year is a far cry from the brutish American system

portrayed in the 1997 summer blockbuster movie *Con Air*. (Zakreski, 2000, p. E1).

Mr. Dhanoa, an honours student at Woodbridge College, suffered the injuries during an episode of gang warfare reminiscent of *West Side Story*. (Kohler, 2005, p. A15)

The cinematic descriptions journalists deploy create vivid images in the minds of readers about gang members and their activities by relying on schemes of perception that already exist within the reader. The more implicit the connections between crime reporting and genre films, the more strongly they rely on pre-existing schemes of perception. Recent reports have painted pictures of a city “being swept by a wave of crime by young people” (Taylor, 1989, p. A1), in which

A teenager is pummelled in the head by four marauding youths rampaging through a north Toronto school. A well-dressed teen-ager riding the subway is robbed of his jacket by a swarm of other well-dressed adolescents. A tourist family strolling near the Eaton Centre is taunted by knife-wielding youngsters.

If this paragraph does not remind you of half-a-dozen superhero films (e.g., *Batman Begins*, 2005; *The Punisher*, 2004; *Superman*, 1978; *Sin City*, 2005) and post-apocalyptic scenarios (e.g., *A Clockwork Orange*, 1971; *The Book of Eli*, 2010; *Children of Men*, 2006), you have not been watching enough movies.



Figure 1.4: Depictions of gangs in Canadian crime reporting often rely on schemes of perception shared with Hollywood films, whether based on realistic dramas or speculative fictions like *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) as seen above.

Furthermore, Eustace (2007) evokes a film noir-ish image of Vancouver's entertainment district, where:

A young woman walks barefoot down the sidewalk, seemingly impervious to the rain overhead and the grime underfoot. It's 2 a.m. on a recent Friday night...I've witnessed four fights, I've seen countless men urinating; I've watched a self-professed gang member burst into tears. (p. A1)

Similar images appear endlessly in Canadian journalism, evoking elements that complement both classic Hollywood films like Howard Hawk's *Scarface* (1932) and Michael Curtiz's *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) as well as contemporary films and television shows like Michel Mann's *Heat* (1995) or HBO's *The Wire* (2002-2008). As

authors such as Ehrlich (2004, 2005, 2006), Good (1989, 1998, 2000, 2008), and McNair (2010) point out, journalism and cinema share a long and intertwined history.

“Normalised through reiteration, news becomes more like the movies” (Miles, 2003, p. 48).



Figure 1.5: References to television shows like *The Wire* appear frequently in real-life crime reporting.

Criticisms

I turn to Bourdieu’s theoretical framework because it allows me to interrogate news media depictions of gangs without espousing subjectivist views that find individuals completely autonomous, nor reverting to structuralist perspectives that deny agency to readers and journalists. But Bourdieu is not without his critics. Habitus, for example, remains a contentious concept that “has come under fire for being too 1960s, too limited to the French social structure and too static” (Bridge, 2004, p. 62). Ironically, Lipietz

(1997) writes that Bourdieu has been “systematically criticized on two fronts: as a structuralist and also as a methodological individualist” (p. 255). While the scope of this examination does not permit a closer scrutiny of these various criticisms, I will mention that, after reading Bourdieu, I am always struck by the simplistic renderings of his work that many scholars sketch out in order to criticise him. As Swartz (1997) suggests, “many of Bourdieu’s critics do not sufficiently appreciate the complexity of his thinking” (p. 68). Arguing, as Giroux (2001) does, that habitus does not allow room for resistance in schools simply does not make sense after reading *Homo Academicus* (1984/1988), *Pascalian Meditations* (1997/2000), or virtually any of Bourdieu’s major texts on academia. In fact, Bourdieu (1990a) points out that *Homo Academicus* (1984/1988) is *about* resistance in education after the events of May 1968. Similarly, calls of structuralism seem to look only at Bourdieu’s concept of field and strip it of its dynamic characteristics. While claims of methodological individualism seem to view habitus as a pre-determined and conscious individual trait, forgetting that it is precisely in the “transindividual dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1984/1988, p. 95) and virtuosic “improvisation” (Bourdieu, 1972/2007, p. 79) that the concept makes sense. Unfortunately, like Swartz (1997), I find that critics frequently fail to acknowledge much of what Bourdieu has written, isolating points that are predicated on others (e.g., field/habitus, symbolic violence/misrecognition) in order to attack a single statement out of context.²¹

Most importantly, Bourdieu’s critical theoretical framework allows me to move beyond the banal arguments that appear too frequently in the communications field.

²¹ For more elaborate explanations of Bourdieu’s critics, see Brown and Szeman (2000), Grenfell, (2004, 2008), Fowler (2000), Jenkins (2002), Myles (2010), Reed-Danahay (2005), Richardson (2012), and his own responses in Bourdieu (1990) and Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992).

Often, I read statements like: *this study separates fact from fiction* or *this book replaces lies with truth*. The implication of such declarations is that the authors have “the facts” while everyone else in the media has been spreading lies and deception.²² While these assertions are commonplace in news media criticism (see Fuhrman, 2009; Kitty, 2005; Muraskin & Domash, 2006; Winter, 2007), they merely substitute one person or group’s account of the truth for another while missing the nuanced and complicated symbolic power struggles that legitimate certain worldviews and cut off other perspectives through subtle, yet potent, manoeuvres that function nothing like a conscious conspiracy. As Grenfell (2004) argues, Bourdieu looks to “a greater ‘truth’ than both ‘common sense’ or ‘scholastic knowledge’” (p. 200).

Unfortunately, even studies that reflect on issues of truth and accuracy in gang reporting tend to overlook the author’s own position within the field of academe and its dynamics of power and knowledge. In their study of Nevada gang representations, for instance, McCorkle and Miethe (1990) spend a chapter discussing objectivist versus constructionist perspectives. In the constructionist point of view, with which the authors align themselves, “what is thus important is not the actual nature of the condition, but rather what these individuals *say* [emphasis in original] about that condition” (p. 11).

McCorkle and Miethe highlight how ideologically driven claims-makers manipulate gang

²² This set of assumptions is also central to an ever-increasing supply of popular “insider” gang (auto)ethnographies (e.g., Langton (2009) Shakur (2004), Venkatesh (2009)). These authors generally argue that representations of gangs in the news are not as true because the journalists did not have insider access. Conversely, Venkatesh (2009), describes himself as “an outsider looking at life from the inside” (p. xiv). Shakur (1994) challenges readers to “look then, if you dare, at South Central through the eyes of one of its most notorious Ghetto Stars and the architect of its most ghastly army—the Crips” (p. xv). Even if these books correlate exactly with actual events—Langton (2009) is explicit that he has taken liberties with names and dates but asserts that he “didn’t make very much of it up” (p. i)—they are all based on singular, idiosyncratic events that fail to provide significant analysis of the larger issues at stake.

discourses through “symbolic representations that distort and dramatize their respective conditions” (p. 12). This strategy often deploys dramatic narrative structures, conflates one thing or group with another, emphasizes the threat to children, and manipulates numbers (e.g., uses deceptive statistics to exaggerate threats). This critique is one with which the mainstream media are frequently charged and I would not take such issue with McCorkle’s and Miethe’s work had they not reverted to the same means they criticize—particularly dramatic narratives and statistics—to *counter* these dominant media narratives. In effect, they argue that “claims-makers” are motivated to exaggerate a threat level in order to sell their case for more police funding, stricter laws, etc. Would a university professor not stand to benefit by effectively doing the opposite? If one were attempting to write an interesting and noteworthy study about moral panics that demonstrated a significant gap between fact and fiction, would there not be a motivation to write in a more authoritative voice, create distinctions between groups and thereby drive down the number of gangs while de-emphasizing the threat to children and communities? As Bourdieu (1997/2000) suggests, only by reflecting on one’s own habitus and position within the scholarly field can an academic hope to remove “scholastic distortion” and see the world “as it presents itself to those who do not have the leisure (or the desire) to withdraw from it in order to think it” (p. 51).

McCorkle and Miethe (1990), like many other gang scholars, seem to forget that they too represent gang discourses from a specific—not a universal—point of view. It is worth quoting their argument about statistics at length:

The *manipulation of numbers* [emphasis in original] is a powerful strategy in the promotion of social problems...But measuring a social problem is

not like measuring physical objects; it involves decisions about the construction of categories, where to draw the line, and what is and what is not to be included in the measuring; in other words, someone decides what to count and how to count them. In the measurement of a particular condition, claims-makers have tremendous incentive to fudge the numbers. (p. 13)

Jump ahead to page 194 and the authors' attitude towards the numbers game changes significantly:

The Gang Enhancement Statute, touted by police and prosecutors alike as an absolute requirement in the battle against street gangs, was charged by prosecutors in both jurisdictions a total of 287 times in four years following its enactment in 1991... Only 41 gang members were actually convicted under the statute during those years. Given the purported scale of threat posed by street gangs, Nevada residents might see these numbers as low.

I am not implying that the authors' numbers are inaccurate or that they have tried to mislead readers. There is clearly, however, a lack of self-reflexivity in pointing a finger at "claims-makers," or as Hall et al. (1978) would call them "primary definers" (p. 57), and accusing them of various rhetorical strategies while refuting such claims from a similar position, albeit on the other end of the ideological spectrum. What Bourdieu allows scholars to see is that they frequently overlook the ground upon which both sets of claims are situated.

Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field

While his direct impact on journalism and media studies may not be as influential as it was on disciplines like education and the arts, Bourdieu's efforts have been adopted and adapted by many media studies scholars (e.g., Benson & Neveu, 2005; Brown & Szeman, 2000; Fowler, 2000; Myles, 2010; Park, 2009; Swartz & Zolberg, 2004), and his critical view of language, representation, and the distinctions they produce provides a valuable approach to journalism studies. In his most relevant journalistic work, *On Television*, Bourdieu (1998a) argues that, while journalism was never as ideal as certain nostalgic historians claim, it is now under threat by pseudo-critical talking heads hired to attract the lowest common denominators. Much of Bourdieu's writing on the media is thus an attack against the ills of simplistic, unreflective news production (1998a, 1998b, 2003). He writes:

A certain category of journalists, recruited at great cost for their ability immediately to fulfill the expectations of the public that expects the least—journalists who are necessarily the most cynical, the most indifferent to any kind of structural analysis, and even more reluctant to engage in any inquiry that touches on politics—tends to impose on all journalists its “values,” its preferences, its ways of being and speaking, its “human ideal.” (Bourdieu, 1998a, p. 51)

He explains that television, radio, and newspapers create fatalistic and submissive attitudes that must be criticized and defended by those concerned with social struggles. Bourdieu (1998b) argues that social scientists must “fight against saturation by the media” (p. 57), and he maintains that in doing so, scholars and public intellectuals should

help “non-professionals to equip themselves with specific weapons of resistance” (ibid). As a number of authors point out (Forbes, 2000; Pinto, 2000; Schinkel, 2003, Swartz, 2003; Whelan, 2002), Bourdieu began to take a committed political stand in the mid-1990s, engaging with media more explicitly and, as Swartz (1997) argues, with a “utilitarian orientation” (p. 68). For this reason, he received harsh criticisms from French journalists, who felt his criticisms of the media were heavy handed. I believe, however, that journalists can gain valuable perspective by taking Bourdieu’s ideas seriously rather than dismissing them as antagonistic.

Bourdieu (1998a) argues that “it goes without saying that it is not a question of blaming or fighting journalists, who often suffer a good deal from the very constraints they are forced to impose” (p. 14). He provides some of the most effective conceptual tools— notions such as symbolic violence, habitus, and field— for combatting problematic representations within the news media. Bourdieu (1998a) suggests that current media systems “have nothing to do with the democratic expression of enlightened collective opinion or public rationality, despite what certain commentators would have us believe” (p. 67), and he argues that critical thinkers “must not ignore the exceptional symbolic power given to state authorities to define, by their actions, their decisions, and their entry into the journalistic field...the journalistic agenda and the hierarchy of importance assigned to events” (p. 70). As a committed media studies scholar inspired by Bourdieu’s work, I feel an obligation to challenge this situation. Consequently, my study seeks to deploy Bourdieu’s conceptual framework to interrogate how certain actors and groups impose ways of seeing the world that can very easily be misrecognized by readers as natural, inevitable, and unquestionable. Each chapter of this dissertation, therefore, stems

from the desire to understand how symbolic power functions in the news media and to present useful ways of challenging it. Without claiming that gangs are misunderstood heroes or that fears of crime and violence are completely unwarranted, I focus on the ways in which these issues manifest symbolically in Canadian journalism.

Research problem

Ultimately, the following chapters seek to answer a single overarching research problem: How do Canada's major daily newspapers represent "gangs" and what do these representations reveal about symbolic power within the field, particularly in relation to cultural, political, and social discourses of crime?

Organization

To answer my research problem, I divide my study into seven chapters. In these chapters, I progress from a brief genealogy of gangs and their representations to a theoretical mapping of the most pertinent concepts related to these issues. I then interrogate the gang representations within daily journalism in Canada through a multi-layered, interdisciplinary exploration that elaborates many of the questions I have raised along the way.

In Chapter One—this chapter—I have outlined the scope of my research. First, I provided a brief historical account of gangs, their coverage in the media, and the issues affecting researchers today. I delineated my major concerns and began to develop my argument that an interdisciplinary media studies project is needed to respond to the issues that have not been successfully interrogated elsewhere. I introduced the main theoretical

concepts that inform my studies, and I presented my overarching research problem followed by an outline of the dissertation as a whole.

Chapter Two explores the definition of “gangs” in Canadian newspapers. As I have emphasised, the closer one looks at media texts in Canada, the more difficult it becomes to answer this seemingly simple question: what does “gang” mean? With Liam Kennedy as co-investigator, I examine almost 3,900 occurrences of the term and its variants (“gangs,” “ganging,” and “ganged”) in *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Star*, *The Vancouver Sun*, and *The Montreal Gazette*. By literally counting the different types of gangs to which journalists refer, I develop a set of raw data that will allow me to explore deeper and more qualitative questions in other chapters.

Chapter Three explores the *West Side Story* allusions that continue to appear frequently alongside representations of gangs in the Canadian press. While knowledge of gangs has changed significantly in the last few decades, the allusions have not. I examine the problems inherent in continuing to refer to a 50-year-old fictional conflict in Manhattan to describe gang members in Canada by outlining what is at stake in this metaphorical language. I conclude by calling for journalists to take on more self-reflexive reporting practices and to question their class habitus when covering gangs and attempting to convey meaning to diverse groups of readers.

Chapter Four examines the connections between politicians and criminal gangs in Canada. In 2011, the Conservative Party won a majority government, running on a tough-on-crime platform that specifically targeted “gangs” as a threat to citizens’ safety. Simultaneously, Prime Minister Stephen Harper argued that a coalition of opposition leaders was “ganging up” on him. Examining the gang imagery in press coverage during

the 2011 Canadian federal election, I reveal the power of the word “gang” in mediated political discourses and suggest that it represents a considerable concern for democratic communication, specifically within mainstream journalism.

Chapter Five addresses popular understandings of suburbia within North America. For decades, many large cities have garnered attention for the perceived danger of gangs lurking just outside their urban centres. Reporters generally represent these cases as anomalies within an otherwise homogeneous arrangement of banal, white, middle-class communities. By examining depictions of suburbs outside of Los Angeles, Paris, and Toronto, I explore Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence in relation to Lynn Spigel’s work on popular memory. I investigate suburbia’s place within contemporary popular culture and why it refuses to change its idyllic reputation despite myriad contradictory examples of gangs outside city centres.

Chapter Six explores two artistic interventions into the discourses of marginalized youth and gangs, moving from Clichy-sous-Bois in France to the neighbourhood of Regent Park in downtown Toronto. Drawing on Nicolas Bourriaud’s concept of relational aesthetics, I examine how these mediations open dialogues among journalists, residents, and their broader publics by destabilizing the dominant tropes and images of these spaces as criminogenic ganglands. I investigate the cultural and political implications of such interactive strategies and highlight how they oblige journalists and members of the public to rethink depictions of stigmatized neighbourhoods, fostering a more nuanced conversation about public perceptions. I conclude by elaborating how such tactics can inform future grassroots movements.

In Chapter Seven, I highlight the key findings of the previous chapters and I examine the implications of this research for criminologists, journalists, media scholars, and citizens. I also address what questions have been raised and not adequately answered, providing a detailed breakdown of where scholars may direct future inquiries into media representations of gangs.

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2. What We Talk About When We Talk About Gangs: Defining “Gangs” in Contemporary Canadian Newspapers¹

Chris Richardson and Liam Kennedy

This chapter examines the different significations of “gang” and its variants (“gangs,” “ganging,” and “ganged”) in the top-selling English-language newspapers in Canada. After reviewing all articles from 2010 in *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Star*, *The Vancouver Sun*, and *The Montreal Gazette*, the study finds that “gang” describes diverse subjects from vandalism by teenagers to extortion by organized crime syndicates to terrorist plots by religious extremists. Furthermore, up to 17% of the time, “gang” simply denotes a group of friends or acquaintances with no criminal connections. We analyse these cases to determine if a shared collective meaning exists among journalists and argue that journalists must reconsider current practices that tend to label marginalized groups as “gangs” while leaving out others. We conclude by outlining issues that researchers may wish to expand upon in future work on representations of crime in journalism.

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But if someone says, “How am I to know what he means—I see only his signs?”, then I say, “How is *he* to know what he means, he too has only his signs?” (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, p. 147)

Introduction

In 2010, the term “gang” appeared almost 3,900 times in the top-selling English-language newspapers in Canada.² The frequency of this word has been steadily increasing over the last few decades, demonstrating the higher degree to which Canadians, like their counterparts to the south, are transfixed with mediated images of gangs and related issues of crime, delinquency, and violence. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that each occurrence of the word relates to the same thing. Up to 17% of the time, newspapers deploy the term “gang” without any relation to criminality. Instead, they describe the characters of the popular Peanuts comic strip (Fredrix, 2010), the cast of *Saturday Night Live* (Brownstein, 2010), and even a group of scientists at The Canadian Institute for Theoretical Astrophysics (Brown, 2010). Of the criminal gangs that appear, journalists refer to bikers (Sher, 2010), drug dealers (Rochon, 2010), militias (Ward, 2010), terrorists (Timson, 2010), thieves (Sachs, 2010), youths (Stechyson, 2010) and many other collectives. The purpose of this chapter is to bring attention to the divergent significations the term “gang” holds in Canadian journalism and its implications for public understandings of crime.

² For the purpose of this study, we refer to *The Toronto Star*, *The Vancouver Sun*, *The Montreal Gazette*, and *The Globe and Mail*, which each hold weekly paid circulations of more than 1 million (Newspapers Canada, 2011).

Gang is a word that can lead to stigma, discrimination, fear, jail, and even death, It is therefore crucial that journalists be more self-critical about how they apply the term, to whom, and in what contexts. In Canada, gang definitions vary greatly (when there are any at all). As a starting point, *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* defines the noun as

1. (a) an organized group of criminals. (b) (informal) a group of people who regularly associate together. (c) an organized territorial group of esp. urban youth demanding loyalty from members, engaging in various criminal activities, and often violently rivalling other groups.
2. a set of workers, slaves, or prisoners.
3. a set of tools etc. arranged to work simultaneously.

The Canadian Criminal Code does not define “gangs;” nor does it even mention them. Although a statute on “criminal organizations” enables prosecutors to charge groups that the average person may label a “gang,” the absence of a legal definition allows journalists and their sources to use the word as they see fit, applying it to individuals and associations that may appear quite disparate.³ The first major Canadian study on youth gangs defined the term as

³ The Canadian Criminal Code defines “criminal organizations” as a group, however organized, that a) is composed of three or more persons in or outside of Canada; and b) has as one of its main purposes or main activities the facilitation or commission of one or more serious offences that, if committed, would likely result in the direct or indirect receipt of a material benefit, including financial benefit, by the group or by any of the persons who constitute the group.

This definition specifies, however, that it “does not include a group of persons that forms randomly for the immediate commission of a single offence.” Thus, while the word “gangs” has been—and continues to be—deployed in myriad ways within legal, media, and political discourses, it is not a legal term in Canada.

a group of youths or young adults in the respondent's jurisdiction, under the age of 21, that the respondent or other responsible persons in their agency or community were willing to identify or classify as a gang.

(Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003, p. 1)

The study also explicitly excluded from this definition “motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs, and other exclusively adult gangs” (ibid.). Seven years later, the same corporation, led by Michael Chettleburgh, conducted the 2009 Police Survey on Street Gangs, defining its subject for law enforcement officers as

a self-formed group of three or more youths or young adults in your jurisdiction, interacting with each other and who engage in a range of criminal behaviors [*sic*], or that you or other responsible persons in your agency or community are willing to identify or classify as a street gang or youth gang. (p. 1)

Again, the study excludes “motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs and traditional organized crime gangs” (ibid.). Even in this example, the two definitions Astwood Strategy Corporation presents vary to the point that any comparison between 2003 and 2009 will be problematic.

Elsewhere, the Montreal Police Services define youth gangs as “an organized group of adolescents and/or young adults who rely on group intimidation and violence, and commit criminal acts in order to gain power and recognition and/or control certain areas of unlawful activity” (cited in Public Safety Canada, 2007). The Criminal Intelligence Service Canada (CISC) and The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) are both careful *not* to define “gangs,” but to provide descriptions of them. For example,

the 2010 Report on Organized Crime states: “Some common characteristics among street gangs include specific gang identifiers and paraphernalia, a common name or identifying sign or symbol, induction rituals and a rigid or loose code relating to the conduct and duty of members and associates” (CISC, 2010, p. 19). Similarly, one recent RCMP (2006) report states that there is “no single, standard operational definition of ‘youth gang,’” but the document quixotically provides data and accounts of this undefined entity.

In this paper, we assess contemporary newspapers’ uses of the term to determine its significations within a more popular form of communication. These media institutions represent a powerful influence on, and indication of, popular discourses of crime within the country. As outlined in the previous chapter, the word gangs has a long and complex genealogy, making its way through Europe’s Early Modern period and applying to pirates, cowboys, liquor barons, inner-city youth, and many more groups in recent history. Kennedy and I argue that the discussion of gangs in Canada must become more self-reflexive, asking not only to what extent gangs are a problem or what must be done about them, but also what exactly this word means to those who use it. Consequently, we are not concerned here with making direct policy or legal recommendations regarding law enforcement’s role in gang management or answering how or why individuals join gangs, participate in them, or eventually transition out of them. Many other scholars, both professional and not-so-professional, demonstrate an eagerness to weigh in on these issues and we see no use in re-iterating all of their positions here. Instead, we seek to

highlight an issue that is rarely discussed in any detail within contemporary studies: what does the current usage of the word “gang” describe to Canadians?⁴

Scholars have not been able to construct a satisfactory definition of gangs in the last century and we make no pretence to hold the key.⁵ Rather, in this chapter, we explore why this lack of an explicit, shared understanding does not impede discourses and policies from developing prolifically when it comes to gangs. Ironically, very few people can define gangs, but everyone seems to hold an opinion on them. This chapter takes the first step toward examining this odd situation by finding out how contemporary Canadian newspapers use the term.

Existing Literature

Many scholars suggest that content analysis is an ideal methodology for exploring issues of representation in the field of media studies (Fourie, 2008; Hartley, 2002; Rayner, Wall, & Kruger, 2004). While not without its problems, content analysis provides an avenue for examining how societies understand and talk about a phenomenon, providing strong empirical evidence that can be shared with others as a point of departure when debating the larger issues at stake.

A rich history of content analysis exists relating to criminal discourses. Hagan, (1983, 2006), for instance, conducts a content analysis of various textbooks and selected

⁴ Some exceptions include Bouchard & Spindler (2010), Curry & Decker (1997), Klein and Maxson (2010), Skinnider (2006).

⁵ Klein (2007) tried to perfect the definition of street gangs through his work with The Eurogang Program, arguing for the adoption of “any durable, street-oriented youth group whose own identity includes involvement in illegal activity” (p. 18) (See also Weerman, Maxson, Esbensen, Aldridge, Medina, & Gemert, 2009). Whether this definition will be adopted by the majority of law enforcement and criminal justice institutions remains unclear.

writers to explore the definitional uncertainty surrounding the concept of organized crime. Dowler (2004), on the other hand, uses this technique to investigate the similarities and differences between American and Canadian crime coverage, concluding that no difference exists in the types of crimes presented—although he finds stories involving firearms, live action, and sensation are more common in American broadcasts.

Often considered the medium of record, newspapers are common sources of data within such studies. One recent example is Welch, Fenwick, and Roberts's (1997) analysis of crime articles published between 1992 and 1995 in four American newspapers. They found that journalists devote a disproportionate amount of attention to street crime and argue that expert sources most often confirm that crime is a major concern (37%) in contrast to those critical of popular conceptions of crime (13%) and those who question official crime statistics (11%). Similarly, Welch, Weber, and Edwards (2000) conducted a search of the terms "prisons" and "corrections" in *The New York Times* between 1992 and 1995, finding that the majority of sources (62%) support the government's position on correctional policies.

Most similar to our own work is Thompson, Young, and Burns's (2000) analysis of the word "gang" in the *Dallas Morning News* from 1991 to 1996. They focus on one newspaper in one American city over the course of several years and conclude that "different groups use references to gangs or gang activities to justify or oppose lines of action that are not directly or exclusively aimed at gangs" (p. 428). In other words, gangs can easily become a source of symbolic power in political negotiations, instilling fear to secure control of resources or state policies that may otherwise appear authoritarian. While we support their theoretical claims, our own research diverges methodologically

by covering more geographical terrain in a shorter period of time, thereby allowing us to draw conclusions about the coverage of gangs across the county rather than in one location. Our choice to include the top-selling Canadian newspapers, however, emphasizes gangs in more populous urban cities, where local newspapers have the highest circulations (We hope to explore the differences between urban and rural media representations of gangs in further research). As we discuss below, Thompson et al.'s (2000) choice of categorization also differs significantly from our own, particularly their decision to eliminate ambiguity within articles by choosing certain themes over others.

Despite exemplary work in Canada on crime and journalism, such as the studies by Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1987, 1989, 1991), gang research in the country is generally beholden to American contexts and discourses (Wortley & Tanner, 2004). Consequently, we found few examples of Canadian studies specifically relating to gangs, let alone gang representations in the media. One exception is Fasilio and Leckie's (1993) report entitled "Canadian Media Coverage of Gangs: A Content Analysis," which samples 120 gang-related stories in Canadian newsmagazines and daily newspapers from July to October 1992. They find that the media characterize gang activity as a threat to society, as widespread, and as a relatively new trend. They also argue that the coverage contains little contextualization or historical perspective and an undue focus on ethnic minorities. Elsewhere, the RCMP published a number of research reports on media coverage of organized crime that analyze the available media representations in Canada and interview journalists and law enforcement agents to glean their opinions (Bruckert & Parent, 2004; Caputo & Vallée, 2005; Dubois, 2002, 2003). These studies demonstrate the high level of influence media coverage holds for both public opinion and law

enforcement officials; the latter tend to be sceptical of news reports and journalists' framing of crime. Other Canadian studies touch on media representations of gangs but do not interrogate these issues specifically (Carrington, 2002; Chatterjee, 2006; Gordon, 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 2000).

Methodology

To begin, we collected articles from a Factiva database search for the term “gang” or “gangs” in *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Star*, *The Vancouver Sun*, and *The Montreal Gazette* from January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2010. These newspapers represent the highest-circulating English-language newspapers in Canada with a combined weekly paid circulation of more than 6 million (*The Vancouver Sun* (1,072,029), *The Globe and Mail* (1,906,686), *The Toronto Star* (2,044,024), and *The Montreal Gazette* (1,094,653)) (Newspapers Canada, 2011). We listed articles chronologically by newspaper and placed them into a spreadsheet where we collected data based on the number of times the terms “gang” or “gangs” appear in the article. We eliminated stories that were not related to the subject (e.g., ones in which a subject's last name calls up the article).⁶ Also, we removed articles when “gang” appeared as a label for a company (e.g., “Last Gang Records”) or within the title of a film or song (e.g., “Amène pas ta gang” by the group Beau Dommage), because it is not possible to assess their meaning within the context of a sentence or a paragraph as we explain below. After this sorting process, we had a total of 1,902 articles that contained the term 3,897 times.

⁶ Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang appeared a number of times.

Notably, in Thompson et al.'s (2000) study, researchers distinguish eight themes that emerge, choosing one category per article where multiple themes exist. They base their decisions on how many lines journalists devote to each theme, the position of each theme in the article, and whether the newspaper includes the theme in the headline.⁷ Our research represents an important departure from this strategy by coding each word, rather than each article. This decision stems from our finding that journalists often compare and contrast different “gangs” within the same story. Furthermore, as we discuss below, we retain an “ambiguous” category rather than choose one theme over another when a lack of contextual information precludes categorization. We suggest that the ambiguity present in gang representations is a significant finding in and of itself—one that researchers should not ignore.

In our study, we first note gangs as being “crime-related” or “not crime-related” based on the context of the story. We define crime, in this case, as “human conduct in violation of the criminal laws of a jurisdiction that has the power to make such laws, and for which there is some form of authorized sanction” (Schmalleger & Volk, 2008, p. 4). This category is fairly self-explanatory and generated virtually no disagreement between coders. One challenge, however, was that journalists frequently wrote as if their assumptions about the signification of the word “gang” were so self-evident and shared among Canadians that no explanation was necessary. Consequently, the question each

⁷ Thompson et al. (2000) establish the categories: 1) *gang crime*, all criminal activity related to gangs; 2) *gang busting*, criminal justice responses to gangs; 3) *gang accounts*, any mention of gangs used to contest or support the elimination or creation of rules that target more than just gang activity; 4) *gang resisting*, efforts by various organizations to provide youth with an alternative to gang activity or attempts to discourage gang activity more generally; 5) *gang references*, allusions to fictional or historical gangs, editorial warnings about gang crime, and single mentions of a gang or gang member; 6) *foreign gangs*, references made to gangs operating in foreign countries; 7) *gang research*, information about gangs and gang research; and 8) *gang rape*, cases in which multiple individuals sexually assault their victim.

researcher posed while examining the material was, Within the context of the paragraph, would an informed reader be able to assess whether this “gang” committed/commits criminal activities? Thus, in the sentence, “American Idol runner-up Katharine McPhee appears in tonight’s episode as Pierce’s estranged stepdaughter, in a story that revolves around the gang reconnecting with family” (Strachan, 2010, p. C5), both researchers concluded that the group was not crime-related. Similarly, in the statement, “Pirate attacks around the world hit their highest level last year since 2003, with Somali gangs accounting for more than half the incidents” (“Friday at a Glance,” 2010, p. A2), we each understood crime to be taking place. The majority of categorizations proceeded in this way. When a disagreement arose, we were able to reach an accord after a brief conversation. The Krippendorff’s alpha for the “crime-related” and “not crime-related” variables are 0.955 and 0.935 respectively.⁸

We established more specific categories after reading through a large sampling of articles and divided the entries into 1 of 14 categories (Table 2.1). We based assessments on the ways in which journalists use “gang” in the paragraph. Thus, if the article mentions a “youth gang” or a “street gang,” we note this each time the term appears. In other cases, we based the decision on what the reporter emphasizes in the text. If a story is about gangs selling cocaine, we note this as a “drug” gang. If it focuses on the young age of members, we code the item as a “youth” gang. On occasions in which the term does not clearly fit into one of these categories, or equally addresses many categories without emphasis, we list the term as “ambiguous.” Also, if the term appears without any

⁸ See Freelon (2010) for a discussion of the ReCal intercoder reliability calculation tool.

contextual information, we list it as “ambiguous.” Again, the agreement between the authors on the Krippendorf’s alpha is 0.85 or greater for each of these categories.

Table 2.1: List of Definitions

Ambiguous	Any occurrence that does not fit into the categories below or merges multiple categories
Anti-Gang Initiative	Primarily police units designed to prevent or contain gang activities but also including community programs and discussions of legal statutes
Biker	A group for which motorcycle ownership is a key feature
Drug	A group that primarily sells narcotics for profit
Hate	A group that primarily discriminates against ethnic, religious, or national groups
Mafia	A subgroup of organized crime characterized by a well-defined organizational structure, a code of conduct, and engaging in illegal activities such as extortion, gambling and racketeering
Political/Military	A group or party that represents or challenges the social order in a specific polity
Prison	A group that operates in correctional facilities
Religious	A group united around a particular religion or religious belief
Social	A group of people who gather for social purposes that are not crime related
Street	A group that operates within and/or controls a specific community or area in which they partake in illegal activities
Terrorist	A group that performs or attempt to perform strategic acts of violence designed to instil fear in their target communities
Theft	A group that steals from people or institutions as their primary source of income
Youth	A group that has a particularly young membership or attempts to recruit younger members; generally under 21 years of age

Our interpretation of each story relies on some degree of cultural knowledge. For example, one must be somewhat familiar with television to know the entry in the following sentence does not denote a “street gang,” but a “social” (i.e., non-criminal) group of puppets:

The celebrity cameo has become just one of the many keys to Sesame Street's renowned reputation for teaching generations of kids to read and write and share, but it's a big one, with Big Bird and the gang having hosted hundreds of Hollywood's finest since the show's 1969 debut.

(Fralic, 2010, p. E1)

Conversely, in a phrase such as "leading members of the Red Scorpion gang" (Bolan, 2010b, p. A12), we consider this entry ambiguous because, although the authors are aware that the Red Scorpions are a drug-running gang in British Columbia that originally formed in a young offenders facility, the average reader may not hold such knowledge and the journalist does not provide enough information in this story to enable a reader to classify the type of gang. In uncertain cases, Kennedy and I discussed our choices, sometimes including colleagues or friends in the conversation, to assess what might be considered common knowledge and what would be specialized. In this way, we established general guidelines; for instance, we believe that the Hells Angels are commonly known as a biker gang, whereas the Pagans, also a biker gang, do not hold enough notoriety to allow the average reader to categorize the group without more information. Consequently, we would code it as ambiguous if the journalist does not provide adequate context for the reader to make that connection.

Finally, not all uses of "gang" involve nouns. When "gang" describes an action (e.g., "ganging up," "gang-raping"), we note this and place it into the "verb" category,

separate from the previously mentioned categories of gang type.⁹ Because verbs cannot themselves be considered “Drug,” “Social,” or “Youth,” etc., we do not code them within the same parameters as nouns. We do, however, code the actions as “criminal” or “non-criminal” since a group of politicians ganging up against an unpopular vote (Leblanc, 2010) is not a criminal act, while a group of men gang-raping a victim is clearly a crime (Todd, 2010).

Findings

Canadian headlines about gangs in 2010 began on January 1st with the death of Kenneth Mark, an anti-gang activist in Toronto who was ambushed and executed on his way to a local restaurant. While Mark was the 62nd homicide of 2009, his story begins the coverage of gangs in 2010. Accounts soon followed of bikers feuding on the streets of Vancouver, massive police sweeps in Southern Ontario, reviews of heist films in theatres, and the gang rape of a young woman in British Columbia that garnered attention for the online photographs of the event circulating among her peers. Abroad, Mexican drug cartels, post-earthquake Haitian gangs, Congolese gang rapists, and the bloody downfall of the Jamaican Shower Posse dominated 2010 headlines.

⁹ Even if a term like “gang rape” is technically a noun within the structure of a newspaper article’s sentence, it is included in the “verb” category because it refers to an action and not a group of people.

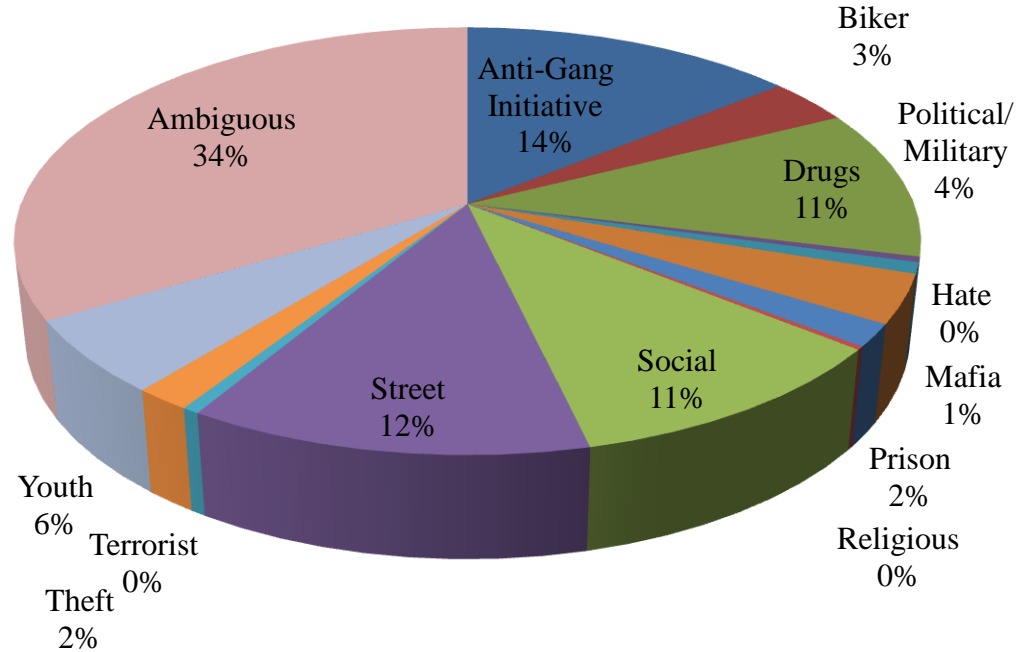


Figure 2.1: Type of Gang, All Newspapers (2010).

In total, the term “gang” appears 3,897 times in the top four newspapers, 3,705 times as a noun and 192 times as a verb (Table 2.2). While approximately 87% (n=3,394) of these occurrences relate to crime, 13% (n=503) denote non-criminal groups such as acquaintances, family members, and friends (Figure 2.1). Overall, we categorize the word as ambiguous in 34% of cases (n=1,243), meaning that we either had insufficient context to code it or the term fit equally well into multiple categories.

■ Crime-Related ■ Not Crime-Related

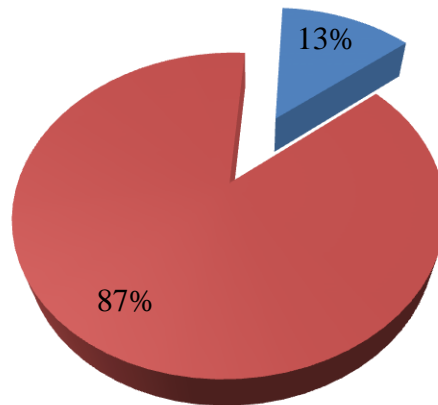


Figure 2.2: Crime-Related “Gang” Usage, All Newspapers (2010).

Across the four newspapers, “gang” describes criminal street organizations (12%, n=455), people selling drugs (11%, n=420), and non-criminal social groups (11%, n=392) at approximately the same frequency (Table 2.2). The term references anti-gang initiatives 14% of the time (n=523), youth 6% (n=207), political/military gangs 4% (n=136), and biker gangs 3% (n=129). “Gang” refers to both groups operating inside prisons and thieves on 2% of occasions (n=63), and refers to the mafia (n=31), terrorist groups (n=19), hate groups (n=15), and religious groups (n=9) at a similarly negligible rate of 1 percent or less.

Table 2.2: Data from all newspapers (2010)

Category	The Globe and Mail	The Montreal Gazette	The Toronto Star	The Vancouver Sun	Total
Crime-Related	598	748	761	1287	3,394
Not Crime-Related	110	150	136	107	503
Verb	60	31	68	33	192
Ambiguous	196	262	229	556	1243
Anti-Gang Initiative	43	70	49	361	523
Biker	25	40	28	36	129
Drugs	65	60	114	181	420
Hate	1	7	2	5	15
Mafia	13	2	11	5	31
Political/Military	53	11	61	11	136
Prison	24	6	17	16	63
Religious	4	0	5	0	9
Social	63	132	99	98	392
Street	78	240	127	10	455
Terrorist	9	6	2	2	19
Theft	24	5	18	16	63
Youth	50	26	67	64	207

Total = 3,897

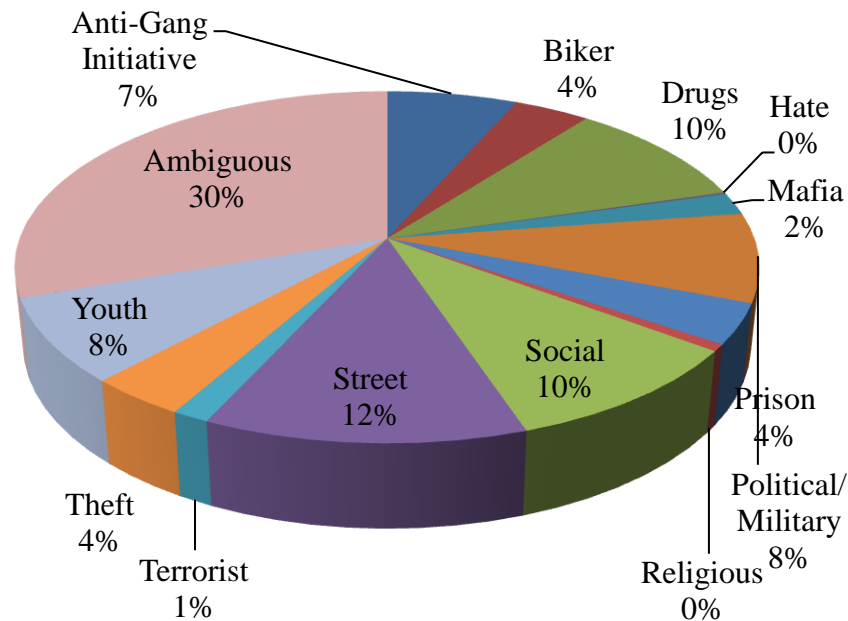


Figure 2.3: Type of Gang, *The Globe and Mail* (2010).

The term “gang” appears 708 times in *The Globe and Mail* (Figure 2.3). This newspaper mirrors the national trends. While approximately 85% (n=598) of these occurrences relate to crime, 15% (n=110) denote non-criminal groups. Again, “gang” is most often ambiguous (30%, n=196). The term indicates criminal street gangs at approximately the same frequency (12%, n=78) as both drug gangs (10%, n=65) and non-criminal social groups (10%, n=63). Several examples help illustrate its wide array of significations in the newspaper. Johns (2010) writes in his review of a new brasserie in Toronto: “For those sitting on the lovely courtyard patio...the view is even better, punctuated as it occasionally is by the odd tweaked-out junkie or gang of wobbly roller-bladers who traverse the space” (p. L2). Elsewhere, the descriptor refers to a family in a Tim Hortons commercial (Bascaramurty 2010), industry professionals (Doyle 2010), and the characters in the latest Robin Hood film (Clements 2010).

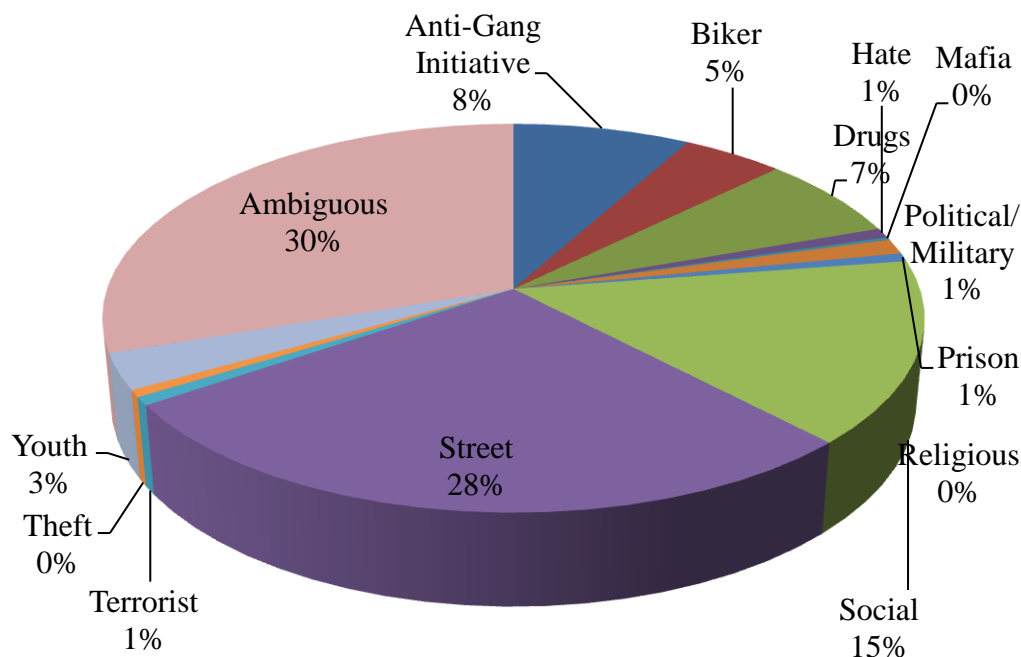


Figure 2.4: Type of Gang, *Montreal Gazette* (2010).

In *The Montreal Gazette*, “gang” appears 898 times, 83% (n=748) relating to crime and 17% (n=150) to non-criminal groups (Figure 2.4). Here, journalists clearly emphasize street gangs, which appear 28% of the time (n=240), topped only by the ambiguous category at 30% (n=262). Yet a cohesive and detailed description of this category is consistently lacking. While we coded these entries in the “street” category, we stress that this does not completely resolve the problem of ambiguity. An article by Paul Cherry (2010) is particularly telling:

Crime related to street gangs appears to be on a significant decline—but that doesn’t mean it won’t remain the top priority for the city’s police force, the top cop in charge of special investigations says... Overall crime tied to street-gang activity dropped more than 25 per cent in 2009 from the

previous year. The decline is attributable in part to 12 major investigations that produced 313 of the 1,150 arrests last year that were related to street-gang activity, he said. (p. A8)

In this article, Cherry uses the phrase “street gang” more than ten times in less than 700 words without ever explicitly discussing its meaning. Notably, the Service de police de la Ville de Montreal (SPVM) (2010a), which published this information, also does not give any definition of street gangs in its release. Elsewhere, it provides a description of street gangs, under the heading “What is a street gangs?” (*sic.*), as “a more or less structured group of teenagers or young adults who use group intimidation and violence to carry out criminal acts in order to gain power and status and/or control certain lucrative activities” (Service de police de la Ville de Montreal, 2008).

While gangs appear in the “mafia” category only twice, rendering it less than 1% of the total gang coverage, the mafia emerges as a separate category much more frequently. For example, after the murder of Nick Rizzuto Jr., the son of a notorious mafia boss, Madger (2010) observes that the “killing sparked speculation that street gangs may be trying to take control of the drug trade from the Mafia” (p. A7). This statement raises a number of questions. That journalists conceive of street gangs as being distinct from the mafia is clear within *The Montreal Gazette*. But what makes them distinct from one another—or from drug gangs for that matter—remains unclear. If these groups are all involved in the drug trade, firebombings, and acts of violence, what is it that determines the label? Rather than attempt to answer such questions, we suggest that it may be wiser to challenge the efficacy of deploying the term “gang” at all. In these cases, more useful terms may be appropriate.

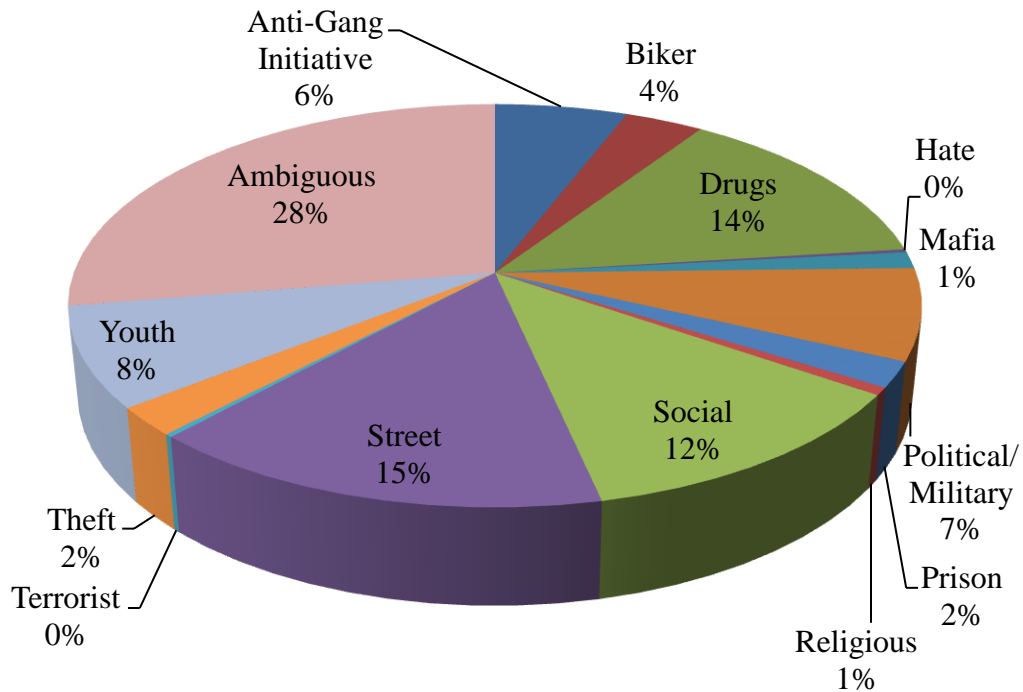


Figure 2.5: Type of Gang, *The Toronto Star* (2010).

Like *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Star* resembles the overall trends (Figure 2.5).

“Gang” appears a total of 897 times, 85% (n=761) relating to crime, 13% (n=136) denoting non-criminal groups. Often merging street gangs and drugs gangs, journalists frequently link groups like the Jamaican Shower Posse, the Falstaff Crips, and the Five Point Generals to drugs, guns, and violence. The criminal exploits of other gangs like the Baghdad Crew, the Galloway Boys, and the Lil Rascalz of Flemingdon Park also surface in Toronto’s news, primarily as street gangs and youth gangs. Despite the extensive coverage devoted to these criminal groups, “gang” emerges 12% of the time (n=99) to describe social groups as disparate as fans of a fashion blogger (Chetty 2010), musicians performing at the Juno Awards (Rayner 2010), and monkeys disturbing the Commonwealth Games in India (Nessman 2010).

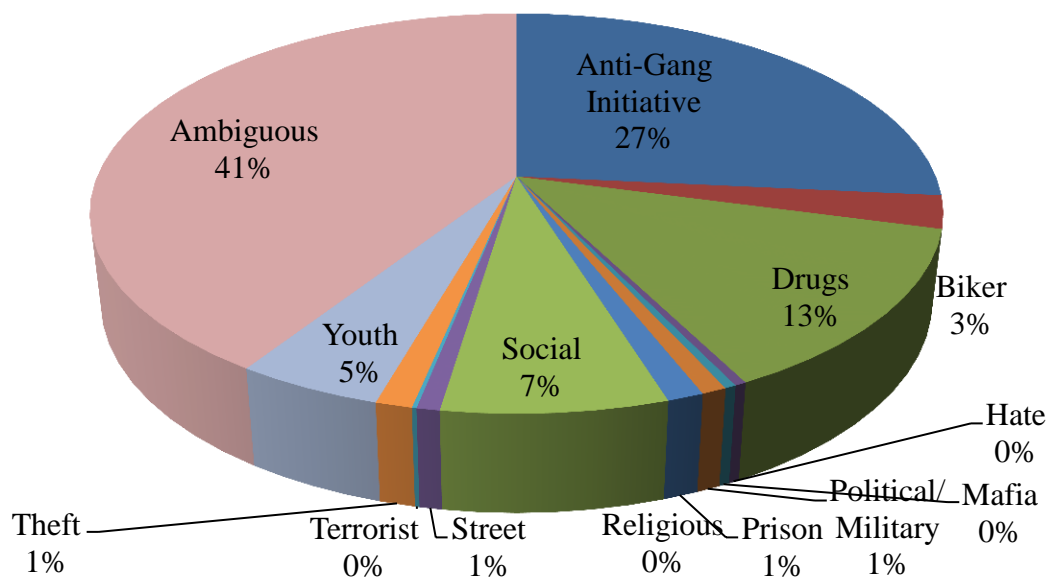


Figure 2.6: Type of Gang, *The Vancouver Sun* (2010).

The Vancouver Sun diverges from other newspapers in significant ways (Figure 2.6). First, “gang” appears a total of 1,394 times, 496 more than any other publication. Approximately 92% (n=1,287) of these occurrences relate to crime, while only 8% (n=107) refer to non-criminal groups. Moreover, we classified 41% of these entries (n=556) as ambiguous—compared to *The Globe and Mail* (30%), *The Montreal Gazette* (30%), and *The Toronto Star* (28%). One possible explanation for this difference is the tendency to refer to a specific group like the United Nations gang or the Red Scorpions (see previous section) without providing a description of its activities or any other contextual information (see Hall, 2010; Bolan, 2010c). We coded 27% (n=361) of all occurrences as anti-gang initiatives, a figure 19% higher than any other newspaper. Some of this increase is due to the four-part series in March that focused on ways to discourage youth from joining gangs. Moreover, the paper joined together with the task force the

following month to run a “Teens Against Gangs (T.A.G.) Poster Contest” (Bolan, 2010d, p. A4). Finally, journalists mention street gangs only 1% of the time (n=10), in stark contrast to *The Globe and Mail* (12%), *The Montreal Gazette* (28%), and *The Toronto Star* (15%). This variance may point to a difference in the way regions of Canada encounter and discuss gangs. Toronto and Montreal, 500 km apart, use more similar language than that of Vancouver, which is more than 4,000 km away. The fact that *The Globe and Mail* is generally run out of Toronto, with many reporters based between Toronto and Montreal, may explain its similarity to the other two newspapers.

Discussion

Journalists describe myriad groups as “gangs,” often without the slightest indication of what this term means to the authors or their presumed audiences. Consequently, there stands to be significant distance between the intentions of the reporters and editors who encode these meanings and the messages readers decode from them. Because “gang” discourses circulate so widely within media institutions, the perpetuation of common-sense ideas and stereotypes about who comprise gangs and what activities gang members perform represents a major problem. As Klein and Maxson (2010) argue, when it comes to understanding and responding to gangs, “conventional wisdom” usually leads to “conventional failures” (p. 91).

While a small percentage of “gangs” appearing in 2010 are not crime-related, the term itself almost always holds negative connotations. As Katz (1988) remarks:

an inside joke that has been shared by field investigators over several decades is that subjects freely refer to their enemies as members of gangs

but instruct an observing sociologist that their collective commitment is to a “club,” an “organization,” a “clique,” a “barrio,” a “mob,” a “brotherhood,” a “family,” an ethnic “nation,” a “team,” or a “crew.” (p. 115)

The negative inferences that accompany this word date back to pirates in the seventeenth century and, as Katz indicates, they have been noted by scholars since (at least) the early twentieth century. The inception of “gang studies” with Puffer (1912/2008), Thrasher (1927/1963), Cohen (1955/1977), and Spergel (1966), have not changed this dynamic. Regardless of the divergence in meanings, widespread agreement persists that “gangs” are not something one wants to be in—even if the person in question is a *de facto* gang member. Despite informed scholarly work, colloquial and idiosyncratic discourses remain strongly entrenched within Canadian parlance.

To emphasize this negative association, we created word clouds in which the size of the word correlates to its frequency within news stories. The results clearly demonstrate more negative associations than positive or even neutral ones when it comes to gangs (Figure 2.7-2.11). The word clouds for each newspaper display a filtered set of high-frequency words. The filtering process consists of first obtaining neighbour words, stemming, and removing outliers. Neighbour words, those words that occur near the target word of “gang,” were obtained by splitting the text into sentences and including only the sentences that occur within two sentences from the target word. Stemming is the process of converting inflected forms of words back to their base forms. This step primarily combines plural and singular forms of a word. For instance, we count ‘crime’ and ‘crimes’ as the same word. Finally, we removed certain outliers and common words,

such as “a,” “with,” “them,” “document,” etc., as well as the newspaper names. Using publicly available software (Wordle: <http://www.wordle.net>) we transformed the resulting frequency list into word clouds (Figure 2.7-2.11).¹⁰

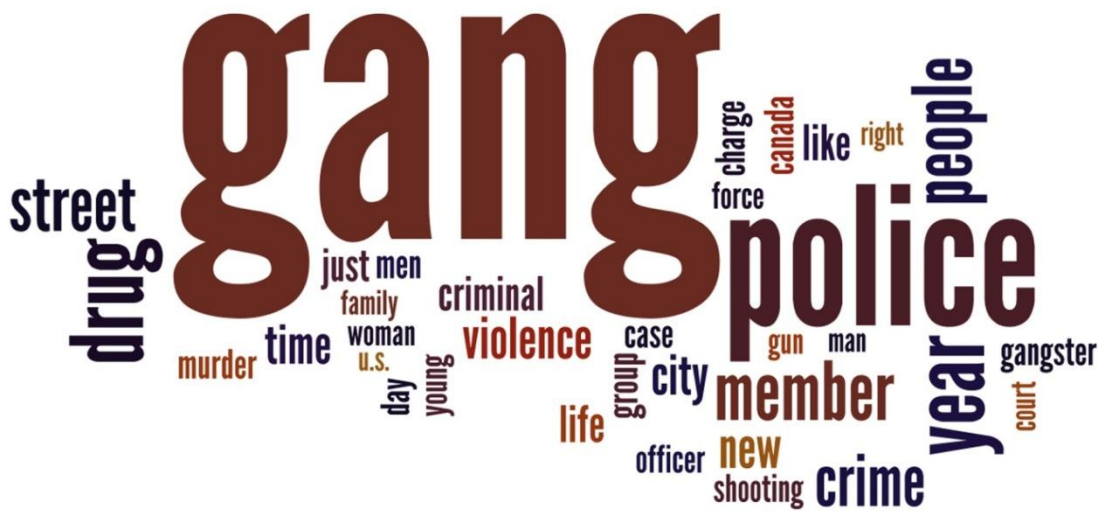


Figure 2.7: Word Cloud—All newspapers (2010).

¹⁰ We greatly appreciate the assistance of Thomas Kerwin, Research Scientist at the Ohio Supercomputer Centre, who helped us through this process.



Figure 2.10: World Cloud—*The Toronto Star* (2010).

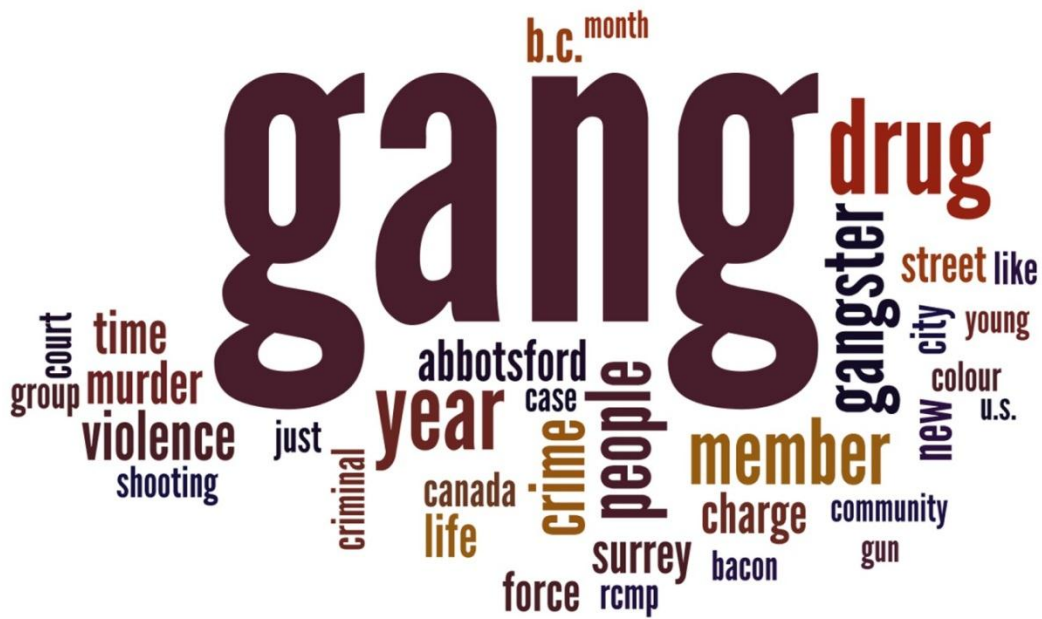


Figure 2.11: World Cloud—*The Vancouver Sun* (2010).

Unlike words such as “murder” or “theft,” the term “gang” is not self-sufficient. Arguably, the statement “Stanley murdered Beth” leaves little doubt that Beth is dead because of Stanley’s actions. While the justice system may question whether or not Stanley is guilty, a basic understanding of the crime is evident. Stanley either killed Beth or he did not. No one is likely to respond to the charges by saying, Well, what exactly do you mean by “murder?” Is she dead? Are you alleging that the defendant played a role in her death? The answers to such questions are apparent. This kind of straightforward articulation, however, cannot be performed with “gangs.” To say that Stanley is part of a gang could mean quite different things depending on the speaker, the audience, and the context. If Stanley’s wife tells neighbours that “Stanley and the gang went out for pizza,” this can simply mean that he took his children to a local restaurant. Conversely, if a police officer tells a courtroom that on the night a local waitress was assaulted “Stanley and the gang went out for pizza,” this statement may lead to significantly different understandings. As our findings demonstrate, any of these meanings can appear in Canadian journalism. Banal social groups, multiple murderers, and everything in between—astrophysicists, monkeys, world leaders, and Justin Bieber fans—all emerge as “gangs” in 2010. Unlike other English terms that hold multiple or ambiguous meanings, “gang” is a particularly powerful word within criminal discourses. It can condemn, denounce, stigmatize, vilify, and, in some cases, hold life or death consequences for those on whom it is imposed.

Journalists face few repercussions for referring to groups as “gangs.” Even when journalists clearly imply shady actions or unpleasant associations, the writer can easily claim the word is merely a synonym for “group,” thereby avoiding any legal

consequences. Take, for example, John Doyle (2010), who argues that “The CRTC excluded the CBC from the possibility of negotiating a fee for its signals with the cable and satellite gang” (p. R1). In this case, the comment is vague enough not to identify individuals or the composition of such a “gang;” however, we argue that the cable and satellite representatives do not appear in a very positive light. While not everyone may share this interpretation, a positive mental image is unlikely to arise when reading this description. Similarly, reporter David Olive (2010) refers to a “gang” in the financial markets that he clearly seeks to paint with an unflattering brush:

We’ve yet to hear an apology from any of the players in the latest flameout for the ages. Goldman Sachs Group Inc., to pick one gang member, was central in the development of some of the ruinous “innovations” that ultimately triggered the loss of millions of jobs in the real economy. (p. B1)

We find it likely that Olive deploys the term “gang” to condemn these executives in a subtle, but meaningful, way. The reader clearly knows these are the bad guys because, after all, they are “gang members.” Finally, Liam Lacey (2010) describes a scene in a dramatic production where “a gang of kids from the run-down apartment complex” gathers to hear stories (p. R7). Arguably, these children are not purposefully represented as criminals; however, by describing the children of a “run-down apartment complex” as a “gang,” the author highlights how “gang” retains negative connotations, even when the term designates a non-criminal social group—in this case, because the group exists in a low-income area.

Many scholars highlight the ways in which gang definitions are inherently racist (Goldson, 2011; Hunt & Ramon, 2010; Lusane, 1991). Our findings in Canada support these arguments by demonstrating that groups that are stereotypically represented as visible minorities—street gangs (12%, n=455) and drug gangs (11%, n=420)—appear prevalently in Canadian newspapers, while traditionally “white” gangs—bikers (3%, n=129), hate groups (0 %, n=15), mafia (1%, n=31), and prison gangs (2%, n=63)—account for very few gangs mentioned in the daily news. As Barker (2005), Barker and Human (2009), and Quinn (2001) note, some visible minority biker gangs exist; however, the overwhelming majority of outlaw bikers are white. Hate groups, by definition, primarily comprise white members (Gerstenfeld, 2011; Simi, 2006), as does the traditional mafia or *cosa nostra* membership (Dickie, 2004; Schneider, 2009; Varese, 2011). Finally, all of the aforementioned groups exist within the North American prison system (Ruddell & Gottschall, 2011). Thus, by explicitly excluding motorcycle gangs, hate groups, prison gangs, and traditional organized crime groups, these journalists, like the Canadian police surveys on gangs, greatly affect the understanding of gangs as comprising primarily non-white members.

Because of journalists’ privileged position within signifying practices, we believe they have a duty to examine the problem of gang definitions more closely. As Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) argue, “the news media help define our communities as well as help us create a common language and common knowledge rooted in reality” (p. 12). Canadian newspapers are important institutions that relay information and help to set agendas for public policies. In this situation, however, the news media both contribute to and reflect a lacking definition of gangs in Canada. And this uncertainty opens the

possibility for those seeking “tough-on-crime” policies and funding to argue convincingly that gangs are a significant problem.¹¹ As Bourdieu (1998) argues, “at stake today in local as well as global political struggles is the capacity to impose a way of seeing the world, of making people wear ‘glasses’ that force them to see the world divided up in certain ways” (p. 22). Unless those representing gangs in print media develop a clear definition or criteria for its usage, gang discourses will continue to scare and confuse readers and stereotype certain groups and neighbourhoods. In the next chapters, I explore how this problem relates to a class habitus (Chapter Three), political discourses (Chapter Four), and urban planning (Chapter Five). Here, with the help of Kennedy, I have attempted to map the terrain on which the following chapters build.

Final Thoughts

Canadians talk a great deal about gangs. The problem is not acknowledging the existence of criminal gangs or convincing the public of the need for law enforcement measures—despite what authors like Chettleburgh (2007) suggest. Rather, the difficulty lies in assessing just what it is we talk about when we talk about gangs. This study finds that journalists deem numerous groups “gangs” in the major English-language newspapers. While the vast majority of instances are crime-related, up to 17% involve groups with no criminal associations. In other words, a men’s curling team, children’s puppets, and a group of monkeys all have a chance of being called “gangs” in Canada. In fact, because of the presuppositions and stereotypes that ensnare popular representations of gangs,

¹¹ For a more detailed analysis of “tough-on-crime” policies and myths in Canada, see Comack & Silver (2008), Hogeveen (2005), Pratt (2000), and Renzetti (2001).

journalists may be less inclined to describe a racist skinhead or a mafia hit-man as a gang member than a law-abiding child in a low-income neighbourhood. Consequently, non-criminals stand to be understood as partaking in crime simply because of where they live or the colour of their skin.

In *The Conversation of Journalism: Communication, Community, and News*, Anderson, Dardenne, and Killenberg (1994) argue that “through a genuine dialogue with a journalism grounded in strong and identifiable positions—which must also be adjustable and collaborative—citizens and journalists understand that journalism is not ‘theirs’ and ‘out there,’ but rather, in many striking ways, is ‘ours’” (p. 20). I think that a conversation is necessary within journalism circles and many other communities to address this significant concern. As Nord (2001) points out in his analysis of newspapers and their various publics throughout history, “communities are built, maintained, and wrecked in communication” (p. 2). Clearly, this is no small issue. Gangs are provocative subjects and it is not surprising the term appears almost 3,900 times within Canada’s top four newspapers in 2010. The conversation, however, must move beyond common-sense understandings and hold interlocutors accountable for their word choices. Rather than simply talking about gangs, the exchange must become more self-reflexive.

No consensus exists regarding the definition of gangs in Canada. Different groups and institutions have different concerns when approaching the subject and are therefore likely to diverge in how they understand and quantify gangs. Furthermore, language is not static, but constantly changing and adapting to new circumstances. I do not think that policing the definition or imposing a single interpretation of “gangs” will solve the issue. But using the term in the media with no qualification is a significant problem. Law

enforcement officers, crime reporters, and other professional organizations must set out clear parameters for when the term is to be used. A productive first step may begin with amendments to such policy sources as *The Canadian Press Style Guide*, *CBC's Radio and Television Style Guides*, *The Canadian Bar Association's Code of Professional Conduct*, and police handbooks, many of which say nothing at all on the subject right now. Acknowledging the imprecision of this term within these crucial fields is an important first step toward alleviating a major source of ambiguity. While popular discourses may not change overnight, reporters can—and should—begin to talk about the power this term holds rather than brandish it about whenever an opportunity arises.

More immediately, everyday reporting practices must contextualize “gangs.” Many newspapers already do this to some extent by using terms like “criminal biker gang” (Daw, 2010, p. B2) or “gang of male friends” (“Information, please,” 2010, p. E7). These are improvements upon simply uttering the word. However, there remains the question of why the reporter thought “gang” was the most appropriate term in these cases. This study suggests that the answer usually lies in a desire, conscious or unconscious, to align certain groups with negative connotations. These practices must be challenged. The response can be as simple as asking the next time someone uses the term gangs, “Well, what do you mean by that?”

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3. “Metro’s Very Own West Side Story”: Gangs and Metaphor in Contemporary Canadian Newspapers¹

For half a century, Canadian journalists have turned to *West Side Story* to describe the activities of youth and street gangs. While knowledge of these groups has changed significantly in the last few decades, the allusions have not. In this chapter, I explore the problems inherent in referring to a 50-year-old fictional depiction of gangs in Manhattan to describe contemporary issues in Canada. Employing a theoretical framework based on Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and symbolic violence, I outline what is at stake in this metaphorical language and I highlight the problematic assumptions journalists in Canada’s top-selling English newspapers make about both their readers and the individuals they cover. I conclude by calling for journalists to consider broadening the spectrum of assumed readers to include at-risk youths, affluent members of society, and everyone in-between to ensure a more nuanced and accurate conversation can take place in the news media about the problem of gangs in Canada.

¹ A version of this chapter has been submitted for publication: Richardson, C. (under review). “Metro’s Very Own West Side Story”: Gangs and Metaphor in Contemporary Canadian Newspapers. *Canadian Journal of Popular Culture*.

Mr. Dhanoa, an honours student at Woodbridge College, suffered the injuries during an episode of gang warfare reminiscent of *West Side Story*. (Kohler, 2005, p. A15)

When youthful Punjabis and Sri Lankans went at each other with rifle, handgun, stun gun, ceremonial sword and hockey stick last month in the shadows of Kipling Ave.'s massive highrises...even police figured it was Metro's very own *West Side Story*. (Dunphry, 1997, p. A6)

One Scarborough politician has even called the incidents the city's own *West Side Story*, a reference to the musical and film portraying New York gang members divided by their ethnic backgrounds. (Wong, 1988, p. A4)

It's the age-old ritual of a street fight. It's like a scene from *West Side Story*...[But] this isn't Spanish Harlem. This is Jane-Finch, in northwest Metro, on a Friday afternoon. (Heller & Teshler, 1979, p. A1)

Introduction: “When you’re a Jet, you’re a Jet all the way”

Not many individuals passing through the neighbourhoods of Etobicoke, Jane-Finch, or Scarborough confuse these areas for the setting of a 1950s musical that takes place in New York City. Nevertheless, dozens of Canadian journalists have compared stabbings, shootings, and group conflicts in these places to the play that later became the Academy-Award winning *West Side Story* (1961). While the fictional plot may be simple—a contemporary Romeo and Juliet with the Capulets and Montagues replaced by Puerto Rican “Sharks” and Caucasian “Jets”—this comparison raises a number of concerns

relating to constructions of gangs in newspapers. By examining the implications of such allusions in this chapter, I seek to highlight the misconceptions comparisons to the film perpetuate and the consequences these understandings hold for criminal justice discourses. To do so, I first examine the role of metaphor in contemporary journalism. I then explore the specific case of *West Side Story* and its relation to present-day gangs. I argue the film's depiction of leadership and group cohesiveness, ethnicity, gender, and place/space differ significantly from recent gang research in North America. Through Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and symbolic violence, I interrogate the assumptions such allusions reveal about journalists and their preferred readers. I conclude by asserting that effective responses to actual criminal justice issues must involve changing the way journalists think about criminal gangs, beginning with the metaphors they use to describe them.

While reviews of the musical appear throughout the 1950s and 1960s, references to *West Side Story* in Canadian newspapers began to surface alongside crime coverage in the decades that followed. In 1979, Liane Heller and Ellie Teshler begin a report on Jane-Finch: "The sun shines on 15 silent young faces and glistens on a switchblade in a teenager's trembling hand. One black, one white. It's the age-old ritual of a street fight. It's like a scene from *West Side Story*" (p. A1). In 1986, multiple articles appear when a Toronto high school student shoots a teacher while claiming he was taking part in the school's production of *West Side Story* ("It's a joke," 1986, p. A1; Robinson, 1986, p. W20). Two years later, a "rumble" in a Scarborough mall leads the local Alderman to state "the more I talk to people about it, the more I find that Scarborough has its own version of a *West Side Story*" (Brent, 1988, p. A6; Wong, 1988). Soon, journalists begin

integrating the play into real-life gang chronologies. In an article on infamous New York mobster John Gotti, a reporter writes that “he graduated from *West Side Story* gang rumbles to the big time” (Chapman, 1988, p. M15). Similarly, a journalist for *The Montreal Gazette* writes:

Montreal certainly isn't the only city confronted with violent teen crime. In the three decades since Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim wrote a musical called *West Side Story*, U.S. cities have watched teen gangs evolve from neighbourhood rowdies hot-wiring cars to big-time crime bosses controlling prostitution, drug-trafficking and extortion. The phenomenon has since been sighted everywhere from London and Paris to Moscow and Seoul. (Curran, 1989, p. A1)

Continuing into the twenty-first century, Nicholas Kohler (2005) suggests that a Toronto teen suffered injuries “during an episode of gang warfare reminiscent of *West Side Story*” (p. A15). *The Toronto Star* featured the headlines “When you're a Jet, you're a Jet” to discuss five young men arrested as terrorist suspects (Wells, 2006, p. A1). As recently as 2009, a *National Post* headline proclaimed: “‘*West Side Story*’ gun and knife confrontation puts 2 boys in hospital” (Kenyon, 2009, p. A10). And a *Montreal Gazette* journalist argued that Rio de Janeiro gangs were “a Brazilian version of *West Side Story*” (Freed, 2009, p. A2). As I will demonstrate in the following sections, these allusions not only fail to add insights or depth to coverage, they distort the problem of youth gangs to support stereotypes that mislead readers.

With fears of gangs increasing in Canada much more quickly than actual criminal activities (see CISC, 2010; Chatterjee, 2006; Dubois, 2002, 2003; Hemmati, 2006; Stein,

2001), a serious problem is at stake—one that is betrayed by such trivial comparisons that paint youth gangs in broad, stereotypical brushstrokes. Today’s journalists, without necessarily intending to, create an image of young male visible minorities who stalk urban streets under a central leader and fight with white counterparts for turf while harassing bystanders and taunting the authorities. It is difficult to negate this image because it comes from the allusion to *West Side Story*, not from actual statements or assertions. In other words, when journalists suggest events are *like* the musical, readers must draw their own conclusions about group dynamics, ethnicity, gender, and location. But before problematic perceptions about gangs in Canada can change, the metaphors that shape public discussions must be taken into account.



Figure 3.1: Journalists’ tendency to see characters in *West Side Story* (1961) when viewing real-life street gangs (as seen in this screen capture from *The Real Toronto* (2005)) remains perplexing.

Bourdieu and Metaphor: “If dreams were thunder and lightning was desire”

Metaphorical language is inescapable. To speak, argues Paul de Man (1982), is to speak in metaphor. That is, a speaker tends to replace one object for another symbolic one to relate pertinent information, to highlight a point, or to draw attention to certain

similarities. In this way, life becomes a highway, the British Empire becomes a lion, the stock market becomes a rollercoaster, and, for George Orwell, socialist revolutionaries become farm animals. The choice of metaphor is always open; only through what Bourdieu and Passeron (2000) define as symbolic violence can groups impose one symbol as the sole legitimate option within a language and negate other possibilities.

Ideally, metaphors provide “the jolt, the *frisson*, that makes us see the world in a different way” (Barnes & Duncan, 1992, p. 11). Dead metaphors, however, create the opposite effect. These metaphors become devoid of relevant meaning and provoke what Jacky Lumby and Fenwick English (2010) term “cognitive skipping” (p. 116). In this case, they contend, “we skip that bit, accept it without assessing whether we ought, and carry on” (ibid.). This tension between critical thought and inert ideas represents what is at stake in contemporary crime reporting and why the choice to compare youth and street gangs to *West Side Story* presents a significant impediment to understanding what is actually happening on the streets of Toronto, Vancouver, and other key ‘ganglands’ in the country.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, I examine the reproduction of this dominant trope by examining forms of learning that are implicit and subtle rather than explicit and overt. Bourdieu (1984) suggests that habitus comprises “systems of differential deviations” that are “perceived by agents endowed with the schemes of perception and appreciation necessary in order to identify, interpret, and evaluate their pertinent features” (p. 170). If one sees the world as a rational economist, for example, it makes sense to divide individuals into consumers and producers. In fact, despite frequent claims that Bourdieu relies too heavily on economic metaphor within his work (see

Albright & Luke, 2008; Brown & Szeman, 2000; Harker, Mahar, & Wilkes, 1990; Jenkins, 2002; Swartz, 1997; Swartz & Zolberg, 2004; Winkle-Wagner, 2010), this linguistic paradigm remains a dominant one throughout the West. One group's capitalist entrepreneur, however, can be another group's immoral villain, and yet another group's enviable celebrity.² Negotiating different—and in many cases contradictory—viewpoints and categorizations represents a significant issue in any debate, particularly because the world is composed of “an endless circle of mutually reflecting metaphors” (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 91).

Augusto Boal's anecdote from *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1985) illustrates well how social differences manifest in metaphors. With his theatre group in Peru, he recounts asking participants to take pictures of exploitation. Most members returned with photos of grocers, landlords, and government offices. One boy presented the group with a photo of a nail on a wall. The other young men nodded their heads in agreement. The adults, however, could not make sense of the picture. Digging a little deeper, Boal found that the boy's job, like a number of young men in the area, involved venturing into the city from his barrio each day to shine shoes. Unable to take his heavy shoe-shine kit home each night, he rents a nail on a shop wall. The person who owns the shop charges boys a few *soles* each night to leave their belongings. Boal writes that “looking at a nail, those children are reminded of oppression and their hatred of it” (p. 125). Conversely, he argues, “the sight of a crown, Uncle Sam, or Nixon...probably means nothing to them” (ibid.).

² In an interesting case in point, different sources on the 1980s New York drug kingpins Frank Lucas and Leroy “Nicky” Barnes refer to these men in all of the ways mentioned above in a recent episode of *Gangland*.

For the most part, these linguistic communities can best be understood through what Bourdieu (2007) calls a *class habitus*: a shared way of acting and categorizing objects among a specific class of people. In this case, the practice of using one metaphor (a crown) and not another (a nail) is not a conscious attempt to mislead others or obscure certain truths.³ Instead, these differing perceptions indicate an unconscious orientation toward the object that seems natural and obvious to those who possess it. For contemporary crime reporting, it means replacing Sri Lankan men with Puerto Rican immigrants, apartments in Jane and Finch with Manhattan tenement houses, and marginalized youth with choreographed theatre performers because it seems to be an obvious point of reference to certain segments of society. As Chris Richardson and Hans Skott-Myhre (2012) argue, habitus is a valuable conceptual tool for explaining how certain practices and worldviews are internalized and normalized within one class, gender, generation, race, etc. while seeming completely foreign to others. Even when groups inhabit the same city, it is possible for such attitudes to appear worlds apart.

In order for a word or image to effectively stand in for something else, it must be recognizable to both the encoder and the decoder. The nail in Boal's narrative worked well to illustrate exploitation among young men in the slums outside Lima, but it said very little to other participants. Similarly, the imagery Canadian journalists use to describe youth and street gangs may appeal to those who frequent Broadway, but it likely has no resonance with the marginalized young people involved in gangs. The schemes of

³ Here, I distinguish my argument from those who posit that journalists or media institutions consciously attempt to dupe readers in books such as *The Murder Business: How the Media Turns Crime into Entertainment and Subverts Justice* (Fuhrman, 2009); *Don't Believe it! How Lies Become News* (Kitty, 2005); *Crime and the Media: Headlines vs. Reality* (Muraskin & Domash, 2006); and *Lies the Media Tell Us* (Winter, 2007).

perception that allow such transformations in the press are the same ones that indicate to young potential readers that their views are neither legitimate nor mentionable within dominant news discourses. Not surprisingly, many young people become sceptical, apathetic, or even hostile toward journalists and the news media because of these attitudes (Hoeschmann, 2004; Klinenberg, 2005; Richardson, 2007). Furthermore, evocations of *West Side Story*, in addition to being somewhat elitist, perpetuate assumptions about gangs that scholar consistently demonstrate to be false. As Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson (2010) put it: “Great musical, poor social science” (p. 163).

Realities and Representations: “It’s not playing anymore”

As a stand-in for contemporary youth or street gangs, *West Side Story* misleads readers in many ways. In this section, I focus on some of the major incongruences between the film and the information provided through recent surveys and ethnographic scholarship. I do this not to assert that such scholarly research is undeniably true and the other undeniably false (in Chapter One, I elaborated on the problems I see with this true/false dichotomy). Rather, I am interested in understanding some of the ways a dominant representation, which is clearly flawed, remains so prominent in journalism. To do so, I investigate how representations of leadership and group cohesiveness, ethnicity, gender, and place/space in the film widely miss the mark when it comes to addressing gangs in North America.

Structure and Leadership

When Bernardo and Riff snap their fingers and gain instant control of their respective gangs in *West Side Story*, they demonstrate a power over others that many young men

might crave but few ever possess. Generally, no charismatic leader speaks for the gang (Covey, 2010; Jankowski, 1991; Klein & Maxson, 2010; Kontos, Brotherton, & Barrios, 2003). Instead, most gangs are amorphous compositions of young men and women that change almost weekly. The Hollywood image that stresses close-knit groups with clear distributions of power and influence apply only to a select few. “Leadership is usually not the hierarchical, command-oriented positional concept stressed by popularisers of gang matters” argue Klein and Maxson (2010, p. 195). “Forget *West Side Story*,” they suggest. Instead, “think more in terms of playground politics where different goals and types of skills lead to impermanent levels of influence” (ibid.).



Figure 3.2: The Hollywood image that stresses close-knit ethnic groups diametrically opposed to one another is a far stretch from most youth and street gangs according to researchers.

Furthermore, when Tony attempts to leave the Jets and pursue a conventional job, his peers force him back into the group to fight and ultimately die at the hands of a rival. More than half of youths who join gangs, however, exit them within a year (Conoley & Goldstein, 2004; Klein & Maxson, 2010; Spergel, 1995; Thornberry, Huizinga, & Loeber, 2004). It may indeed be difficult for entrenched members to desert their friends and leave their ways of life behind, particularly without significant job prospects or alternative social groups. But leaving a gang is not usually as difficult or life-threatening as Hollywood leads viewers to believe. In Canada, organizations such as *Fondation québécoise pour les jeunes contrevenants*, Ontario Gang Prevention Strategy (GPS), Regina Anti-Gang Services (RAGS), and many others provide counselling for gang members who are transitioning out.⁴

Ethnicity

The Jets have an unspoken understanding in the play: only whites may join their gang. Similarly, as Puerto Rican immigrants, the Sharks support members of their own ethnic community and maintain an antagonistic relationship to the Jets. Contemporary street gangs, however, frequently comprise multiple ethnicities, nationalities, and races (Klein, 1995, 2007; Klein & Maxson, 2010; Klein, Kerner, Maxson, & Weitekamp, 2000; Schneider, 2009; Spergel, 1995; van Gemert, Peterson, & Lien, 2008). In Canada, the Astwood Strategy Corporation (2003) found that gangs are even more multicultural than in the US, with the majority of Ontario gangs (51%) consisting of multiple ethnicities,

⁴ While not perfect, these programs have demonstrated patterns of success that challenge popular notions of gang life (Di Paula, Elias, Xue, 2009; Mellor, MacRae, Pauls, & Hornick, 2005; Pearce, 2009).

while British Columbia (46%) and Manitoba (24%) were not far behind.⁵ “We are misled by the images of such dramatic, fictional accounts as *West Side Story*,” argue Klein and Maxson (2010, p. 163). In reality, gangs are not so segregated or pure.

Riff, Snowboy, Tony, and the other Jets frequently refer to themselves as a “gang.” Esbensen et al. (2008), however, found that only a small percentage of white youths (15% in their sample) identify themselves as gang members today. By contrast, 67% of African-American and 43% of Hispanic youths claimed their groups were “gangs.” All of these collectives, however, fell under the designations proposed by the Eurogang Consensus Nominal Definition (Weerman, et al., 2009).⁶ Consequently, while few gangs see themselves divided by racial lines or compete on the basis of ethnicity as in *West Side Story*, certain racialized groups are likelier than others to use the term “gang.” Similarly, members of the public, as well as members of police forces, may be more likely to identify these visible minorities as gang members. If one defines gangs by durability, group identity, and illegal activities, however, there exists a much higher portion of mixed-race gangs than popularly thought.

Gender

When the tomboy character Anybodys repeatedly tries to join the Jets, members tell her to “go wear a skirt!” and “go walk the streets like ya sister!” Evidently, females have no

⁵ Like most data sets on gangs, these are based on police observations and opinions. As Klein and Maxson (2010) observe, “the information upon which so much gang control policy relies may be as much a reflection of law enforcement activity and recording practices as it is of gang activity” (p. 54).

⁶ The Eurogang Consensus Nominal Definition of Street Gangs posits that “A Street Gang is Any Durable, Street-Oriented Youth Group Whose Own Identity Includes Involvement in Illegal Activity” (Klein, 2007, p. 18). Although there is not unanimous agreement among scholars today, researchers frequently cite this definition (Weerman, et al., 2009).

place in the gangs of *West Side Story*. But as I outlined briefly in Chapter One, women have always participated in gangs. Hell-Cat Maggie fought alongside the Dead Rabbits in 1840s New York (Asbury, 1927/2008), the Aphrodite Club made trouble in the 1930s (Whyte, 1943/1981), and the Molls and Holly Ho's fought and stole during the 1960s (Miller, 1973). Discussing female gangs in the mass media, however, remains challenging when so many popular notions rely on films like *West Side Story* and the assumptions they make about the composition of gangs.

As Meda Chesney-Lind and Lisa Pasko (2004) argue, gangs represent a social space “where girls have long been present but invisible” (p. 75). In an American context, Klein and Maxson (2010) argue that “a reasonable estimate of the level of female gang involvement would place it close to 25%—one in four members is a girl” (p. 191). Other authors such as Covey (2010), Nurge (2003), and Maxson and Whitlock (2002) have placed the number of female gang members in the range of 5%, 26%, and up to 33%, respectively. While the 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs identifies only 8% female gang members, its author points out that “law enforcement agencies may be less likely to identify females” (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003, p. 16). Many authors suggest the underestimation is closely connected to the popular imagery of gangs in the media (Cummings & Monti, 1993; Curry & Decker, 1998; Klein, 1995, 2007; Klein & Maxson, 2010; Hagedorn, 2007; Huff, 1990, 1996, 2002; Miller, Maxson, & Klein, 2001). Such depictions also create a vicious cycle when police officers identify more male gang members than female based on such assumptions and seemingly confirm this belief as empirical fact.

The Inner City

As the title reveals, setting is an important element in *West Side Story*. The film begins with an aerial shot of New York City, moving from abstract lines to Manhattan skyscrapers to the crowded housing complexes where the protagonists live. The extreme wide angle eventually closes in to reveal individual youths who look like ants scrambling within a caged, asphalt sandbox. It would be a mistake, however, to take from this scene that only the conditions of cramped and dilapidated inner cities spawn gangs. While *West Side Story* draws on modern fears of the ghetto (Wacquant, 2007, 2008), the inner city (Sanders, 2005; Kemp, 2001), or the hood (Forman, 2002; Richardson & Skott-Myhre, 2012), suburbia has never been as ideal as popular imagery would suggest (Garland, 2009; Korem, 1994; Monti, 1994; Meuhlbauer & Dodder, 1983; Richardson, 2011; Wooden & Blazak, 2001). Metropolitan areas tend to have the largest number of gangs and the most cemented, long-running street gangs (Cummings & Monti, 1993; Curry, & Decker, 1998; Hagedorn, 2007, 2008; Spergel, 1993, 1995; Klein & Maxson, 2010; van Gemert, Peterson, & Lien, 2008), but the suburbs continue to hold many violent groups who fight, steal, and trade in illegal substances.



Figure 3.3: The imagery of inner-city crime and squalor is prominent within *West Side Story* (1961), but not necessarily accurate today.

Much of *West Side Story*'s plot revolves around Tony and Maria's dream of escaping their claustrophobic environment and finding a place where "the walls and the streets disappear" and "peace and quiet and open air wait for us." But if they had actually reached the suburbs, they would have encountered quite a surprise. As reporter Ann-Marie MacDonald states in the CBC documentary *The Gangster Next Door* (2011), quiet neighbourhoods are now "battlefields" where "middle-class suburban boys are doing the killing." While it is not clear why gangs form in certain towns and suburbs—researchers attribute everything from immigration trends (Garland, 2009) to broken homes (Korem, 1994) to the popularity of gang culture in the media (Klein & Maxson, 2010)—most studies agree that gangs do exist outside the city and that they are not products of urban expansions. Such findings clearly trouble the trope of ghetto hoodlums

like Jets and Sharks running amok within the city while suburban children remain safe from the threats of addiction, poverty, and violence.

Cultural Capital and Marginalized Youth: “Officer Krupke, Krup you!”

Prior to *West Side Story*'s tragic climax, an upset shopkeeper exclaims: “When do you kids stop!? You make this world lousy!” In response, a young man quips, “we didn’t make it, doc.”⁷ If a single insight can be gleaned from the frequent references to this film in the news media, I would argue it should be that anger is often misdirected toward youths themselves, ignoring the structural problems at the centre of the issue. The social barriers that hindered achievements among underclass youths and led a minority of them to form criminal associations in the past continue to produce the same results today. Consequently, youth gangs are not going away, despite aggressive law enforcement, increasing criminal legislation, and swaths of political rhetoric. As Klein and Maxson (2010) contend, “the main problem with street gangs *in the long run* is not the gangs themselves, but the societal and community processes that spawn these gangs” (p. 106, emphasis in original).

In Canadian print media, gestures toward “senseless violence” (Crawford, 2011, p. A6) and “age-old ritual” (Heller & Tesher, 1979, p. A1) fail to provide the insights needed to combat street gang problems. It is not sufficient, as Bourdieu (1998) argues, to describe “a world full of incomprehensible and unsettling dangers from which we must withdraw for our own good” (p. 8). To combat contemporary gang problems, news discourses must address deeper issues and challenge common misperceptions instead of

⁷ In the original play, he responds: “That’s the way we found it, Doc.”

perpetuating them through “cognitive skipping.” In some ways, allusions and figurative language present more challenges than inaccurate facts because they cannot be as easily disproven. Scholars can contradict assertions that women do not join gangs or that gangs are unique to the inner city. But the comparison to *West Side Story* is more complex. If I were to argue that, unlike *West Side Story*, gangs are actually ethnically diverse, journalists can argue they mean to highlight group-on-group violence with the analogy. If I were to point out that, unlike *West Side Story*, gang fights rarely comprise two well-defined, diametrically opposed groups, journalists can argue the analogy is meant to draw attention to the young age of the participants. This conversation can become unending because there is always another point from which the metaphor can be understood. My critique is not meant to suggest journalists should abandon metaphors. But they should use them to add insight and perhaps offer reflection—not ambiguity.

In addition to misleading readers, allusions to *West Side Story* appeal to a limited group of readers. Journalists’ strategies must endeavour to include at-risk youths and other marginalized groups in their discussions and coverage of gangs. Almost a century ago, Thrasher (1927/1963) warned that society condemns or ignores the popular cultures of youth at its own peril.⁸ He posited that marginalized youths were not merely delinquents but citizens who formed collectives, in part, because their views were rarely acknowledged and their aspirations were not supported by dominant social institutions. Turning away from mainstream newspapers, young people found comic books, adventure

⁸ In stark contrast to contemporary pundits, Thrasher (1949) argued that: “recent error of this type is that of psychiatrist Fredric Wertham who claims in effect that the comics are an important factor in causing juvenile delinquency. This extreme position... is not substantiated by any valid research... [and] disregards tested research procedures which have discredited numerous previous monistic theories of delinquency causation” (p. 195).

films, and other popular media in which to ease their frustrations. Without an interrogation of the outlooks and values within youth groups, it becomes impossible to fully understand their motivations and actions.

Unfortunately, many of the sections that explored youths' cultural imaginaries in Thrasher's original manuscript have been cut from the edition that currently circulates. James Short (1963), who edited the abridged version of Thrasher's study, writes off this content as outside the scope of gang research. Referring to Thrasher's chapter on cinema and comic books, he argues, "the technology of mass communications has changed so greatly in forty years that this chapter is of little current interest" (Short, 1963, p. li). Consequently, Thrasher's discussion of youths' entertainment rituals and their relation to popular culture is no longer available. Representing the few dissenting voices within this debate, Dimitriadis (2006) calls for a return to Thrasher's original vision, asserting that his "impulse to radically contextualize gang life has sadly been lost on much contemporary gang research" (p. 351). It seems, however, that those in the most prestigious positions disagree.

If scholars consider Bourdieu's work on distinction and social reproduction, this oversight is not surprising. Today, discussions of the cultural tastes and interests of marginalized youth are literally erased by those with more symbolic capital and authority to speak on the subject. Though the objects are different, this situation closely parallels Bourdieu's (1984) work in the late-twentieth century, in which he found that piano music, Renoir, Dufy and Vasarely were *de rigueur* among those in high social positions in France, while accordion music, football, television, and adventure stories were frowned upon by those with discriminating taste. While, enjoying classical music and

impressionist art were not explicit requirements among prosperous, well-established families, Bourdieu found that many of those in high social positions demonstrated distinct and similar tastes that deeply contrasted with those of the working classes. He explained this distinction through positing the existence of a class habitus. This internalized knowledge provided certain groups with the seemingly natural ability to identify those who belonged and those who did not through variations in their language, references, and tastes.

I argue that a similar differentiation is at work when journalists betray a class habitus that judges films like *West Side Story* as appropriate metaphors for gang activities, ignoring the viewpoints of the disenfranchised youth who participate in these groups. In contemporary crime reporting, I find a clear indication that working-class youth are excluded symbolically by those with more economic and cultural capital—those who problematically replace the former’s language and systems of reference with their own. These journalists and gang “experts” effectively speak past marginalized groups to reach other middle-class readers, never truly acknowledging (or grasping) the schemes of perception of the gang members they describe.⁹ Furthermore, this may also point to a generational gap in which *West Side Story* holds no significant meaning for readers under forty years of age. As a musical that arguably reached its pinnacle in 1961 with the Oscar-winning film version starring Natalie Wood, most contemporary readers

⁹ Similarly, scholarly articles with titles such as “A Contextual Analysis of Differential Association, Social Control, and Strain Theories of Delinquency” (Hoffman, 2002) or “The Relationship Between Dimensional Self-Concept and Juvenile Gang Involvement: Implications for Prevention, Intervention, and Court Referred Diversion Programs” [sic.] (Herrmann, McWhirter, & Sipsas-Herrmann) provide a poignant reminder of the aporia between the vernaculars of youth gang members and those in academe who seek to understand them.

are probably not familiar with the intricacies of the play. Consequently, they are not likely to glean any insights about gang life through such metaphors. If journalists hold an obligation to speak to diverse groups of citizens and provide information so that they can make educated decisions, as many authors contend (Anderson, Dardenne, & Killenberg, 1994; Carey, 2009; Gans, 2003; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Lippmann, 1920/2008, 1921/2007), then these crime reporters are failing to live up to that duty by appealing only to older, middle-class readers.

Rethinking Gangs: “Somewhere we’ll find a new way of living”

Hegel once argued that people and events occur twice in history. As Marx (2004) added many years later, first they appear as tragedy, then as farce. This observation no doubt applies to the tired metaphor that aligns contemporary working-class youths with a 50-year-old musical in which actors skip and pirouette while snapping their fingers and bellowing melodies with bright eyes and perfect teeth. The reliance on such cultural artefacts speaks volumes about journalists’ class habitus and the presumptions they make about their readers’ own schemes of perception. Comparing research on contemporary North American gangs with depictions in *West Side Story*, I found that gangs are generally not unified followers of a charismatic leader; they are not ethnically homogenous groups; they are not comprised only of males; they do not all reside in the inner city; and they surely are not Broadway dancers.

The only way to challenge these problematic assumptions about gangs in the news media is to stop imposing one group’s specific worldview onto everyone else. Working with these youths in the context of their communities may allow a conversation to take

place that is not yet occurring. As Klein and Maxson (2010) argue, “long-term successful gang control will not be achieved by intervention with youth but by intervention with the nature of gang-spawning communities” (p. 128). They further assert that “modern social science has not demonstrated, as yet, much capacity for such intervention” (p. 129).

Perhaps this picture can change with a new commitment from journalists. Of course, Canadian newspapers cannot single-handedly transform the complex array of cultural, economic, and social barriers that affect at-risk youth today. But the news media can realign certain images and toss out problematic tropes that will, in turn, affect broader public discourses. With the vast amount of peer-reviewed research available on gangs today, it is inexcusable for reporters’ references to remain trapped in 1961. These dead metaphors must be buried. And with the alteration of these schemes of perception, innovative approaches and significant policy changes can be discussed in a new light, one that may trigger more positive and lasting results.

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4. The Politics of the Gang: Canadian Journalism and Criminal Speech Acts¹

The North American political landscape has changed significantly since the time Thrasher devoted a chapter of his canonical study to the violent youth gangs in Chicago that formed associations with local political figures, intimidating voters in return for financial support from their candidates. But the utility of “gangs” within mediated political discourses remains strong in the twenty-first century. In 2011, the Conservative Party of Canada won a majority government, running on a tough-on-crime platform that specifically targeted gangs as a threat to citizens’ safety. Simultaneously, Prime Minister Stephen Harper argued that a coalition of opposition leaders was ganging up on him, aligning these political competitors rhetorically with young criminals. Relying on speech acts theory, and the more contemporary work of Pierre Bourdieu, in this chapter I reveal the power of the term “gang” in contemporary mediated political debates and suggest that it represents a significant concern for democratic communication.

¹ A version of this chapter has been accepted for publication: Richardson, C. (Forthcoming). “Everyone Kept Ganging up on Harper”: Examining Gang Rhetoric in National Coverage of the 2011 Federal Election. In C. Richardson & R. Smith Fullerton. (Eds.). *Covering Canadian Crimes: What Journalists Should Know and the Public Should Question*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

The political boss finds gangs, whether composed of boys or of men above voting age, very useful in promoting the interests of his machine. (Thrasher, 1927/1963, p. 313)

Introduction

On March 15, 2011, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that his government will provide \$37.5 million over five years and \$7.5 million thereafter to the Youth Gang Prevention Fund (Youth Gang Prevention Fund, 2011). His renewed interest in the program, created in 2007, relied on the argument that “gangs are an increasing concern across the country” (ibid.). In response, Harper pledged that “our Government will continue to take action to protect young people against the lure of crime and gangs” (PM Announces, 2011). That same year, Harper accused members of the Bloc Quebecois, the Liberals, and the New Democratic Party of ganging up against him during a heated election campaign. As a *Vancouver Sun* headline declared: “PM keeps his composure, swatting attacks from three-way gang” (Yaffe, 2011a, p. A2). These events paint two distinct pictures of the “gangs” Harper opposes: one ostensibly refers to young hoodlums causing terror on street corners; another denotes well-dressed party representatives who engaged the Prime Minister in “dishing dirt in a bid to grab crucial ground” (Yaffe, 2011a, p. A2).

Ironically, journalists and political commentators often accuse Harper of being a gang leader (e.g., Freed, 2010; Martin, 2009; Shaw, 2008).² Of course, not many citizens would confuse Canada's twenty-second Prime Minister of flashing gang signs and dealing drugs as he hobbles around in baggy jeans (as common media tropes imply young gang members do today). Even political cartoonists would have trouble rendering that image. This use of the term, however, points to a peculiar ambiguity in mediated gang discourses within Canada. As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, "gang" can evoke not only young men on street corners or gun-wielding muggers in inner-cities, but also groups of artists, political activists, sports teams, and even children's puppets. While it primarily describes criminal groups, the term colloquially refers to any assemblage of people or things.

This study builds on the work of Speech Acts theorists John Searle (1969) and J. L. Austin (1955/1975), as well as Pierre Bourdieu (2010), to interrogate the significance of gangs in Canada's mediated political landscape. I argue that while no satisfactory definition of "gangs" exists in law enforcement organizations, public policy documents, or the Canadian Criminal Code, the imagery of gangs has become a staple for Canadian commentators describing political tactics, particularly because it evokes a seedy, violent, and dangerous underground economy while remaining ambiguous enough to avoid libel laws or direct refutation from those to whom it is applied. Gangs and politicians in North America share a long, intertwined history and the language journalists use to describe

² Such language is most prevalent in letters to the editor where writers appear to feel freer to harness such imagery (e.g., "Back Chat," 2011; "Budget officer," 2009; Deveau, 2011; Goodale, 2008; "PM's Gang of Seven," 2010).

both elements of society today relies on this overlap in order, as Austin (1955/1975) would argue, to do things with words.

A Recent History of Gangs and Politics

In the 1980s, Léon Bing became one of the first journalists to gain access to a number of hard-core gang members in Los Angeles, bringing their stories of guts, gats, and graves to an eagerly awaiting public. As a panel moderator for a forum on gangs, she asserted that “it would be hard to write a morality play more likely to strike terror into the hearts of the middle class” (Bing, 1989, p. 51). She was right. Within the next few years, literally hundreds of anti-gang initiatives formed in North America and dozens of national organizations arose with the sole purpose of monitoring and suppressing gangs. While some authors warned citizens of the dangerous criminals lurking in the nation’s seemingly pristine suburbs (Meuhlbauer & Dodder, 1983; Richards, Berk, & Forster, 1979),³ others have more recently cautioned readers against “a world of gangs,” taking the focus international (Hagedorn, 2007, 2008; Klein et al., 2000).

Canadians living near the American border observed cautiously as US organizations began performing gang surveys in the late 1980s, painting alarming portraits of a neighbouring nation under siege by violent predators. While more recent statistics demonstrate a decline in gangs since 1996 (Klein & Maxson, 2010), twentieth-century surveys indicated a meteoric rise in gang-infested cities from six American municipalities in 1975 to 1,492 in 1996 (Curry & Decker, 1998; Klein & Maxson, 2010). Furthermore, an assessment in the mid-1990s reported 23,388 youth gangs and 664,906

³ For more recent reiterations, see Garland (2009), Korem (1994), and Monti (1994).

members across the country (ibid.). The United States soon coordinated dozens of organizations including 160 Violent Gang Safe Street Task Forces working with The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), The National Youth Gang Center (NYGC),⁴ The National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC), The National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations (NAGIA), The National Gang Targeting, Enforcement & Coordination Center (GangTECC), and The Organized Crime and Gang Section (OCGS) within the Department of Justice. If these acronyms seem convoluted, they likely are; even the various departments that employ them seem to be confused (or simply unable to update their web sites quickly enough).⁵

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, more than thirty US states passed legislation allowing juveniles to be tried in adult courts and many enacted statutes that specifically targeted gangs (McCorkle & Miethe, 2002). The most wide-ranging legal changes designed to battle gangs stemmed from President Clinton's Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, which allocated more than \$30 billion toward policing, imprisonment, and crime prevention (Richardson, 2011). As Bourdieu (1998) argues, such manoeuvres have allowed the right hand of the state (banks, economic organizations, and law enforcement agencies) to become much stronger politically while dissolving the abilities of the left hand (community workers, counsellors, and teachers) to assist vulnerable groups and neighbourhoods. As a result, bureaucrats frequently cut social programs in the name of trimming budgets and eliminating waste while the right

⁴ In 2009, the National Youth Gang Center merged with the National Gang Center.

⁵ The FBI, for instance, lists National Gang Targeting, Enforcement & Coordination Center (GangTECC) as a gang taskforce in 2011; however this group merged into The Organized Crime and Gang Section (OCGS) in 2010 along with the Organized Crime and Racketeering Section (OCRS) and the Gang Unit.

hand inevitably requires exceedingly higher funding to control, enforce, and imprison those whom it casts out of these social safety nets. “The right hand no longer knows, or, worse, no longer really wants to know what the left hand does,” argues Bourdieu (1998, p. 2). “In any case, it does not want to pay for it” (ibid.).

Toward the end of the twentieth century, American fears about gangs spread north. Myriad documents on gangs and organized crime surfaced within The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Department of Justice Canada, Criminal Intelligence Service Canada (CISC), and Public Safety Canada. Politicians supported initiatives such as The National Crime Prevention Centre’s Youth Gang Prevention Fund, The Vancouver Gang Task Force, The Manitoba Integrated Organized Crime Task Force, The Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy (TAVIS), and Quebec’s *Sans frontières* group. In 1997, legislators modified the Canadian Criminal Code to provide prosecutors with more tools to pursue violent biker gangs and other criminal organizations, making membership in such groups illegal (Penal Justice File, 1998). While the word “gang” does not appear in the Canadian Criminal Code, political figures frequently refer to these laws as “anti-gang” initiatives (Department of Justice Canada, 2005). Harper’s 2011 omnibus crime bill represents the latest in a series of movements that highlight fears of crime and gangs, while doing little to actually address these issues (DeKeseredy, 2009; Mallea, 2010a, 2010b, 2011; Maynaro, 2011)

The first major Canadian gang study, based almost word-for-word on the National Youth Gang Surveys in the United States, reported more than 400 youth gangs and more than 7,000 gang members across the country (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003). In the academic sphere, Wortley and Tanner (2004) have conducted interviews with gang

members and associates in Toronto; Gordon (1995, 1998a, 1998b, 2000) in Vancouver; Fournier, Cousineau, and Hamel (2004) in Montreal; Nimmo (2001) in Winnipeg; and Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson (2006, 2008) with Aboriginal youth and prison gangs. These researchers have found diverse membership compositions and self-reported reasons for joining gangs ranging from a desire to impress girls to a longing for violent expression. Virtually all Canadian researchers argue that gangs represent an increasing concern within the country, but that relatively little information exists.

A Deeper History of Gangs and Politics

With the rapid deployment of legal and political taskforces directed toward monitoring, prosecuting, and suppressing gangs in North America, it may surprise many citizens that gangs are neither new nor definitively more dangerous than outlaw groups of previous generations. As I outlined in Chapter One, the English word “gang” entered circulation during Europe’s Early Modern period (circa. 1400-1700 AD), its meaning changing from a journey or a trip to a set of things that travels together. Gangs terrorized the eastern seaboard of North America as pirates and privateers who pillaged and plundered in the new world (Schneider, 2009). In 1623, the Marquis de la Rade’s four-hundred-man crew raided St. John’s and other British settlements, which perpetuated a feud that led English Secretary of State George Calvert to chase them into the Atlantic Ocean (ibid.). The term “gangplank” entered popular usage not long after this period, as did the term “press gang,” denoting a group of seamen or marines led by a commissioned officer who would

force able-bodied men to join the navy (Mercer, 2010).⁶ Press gangs bandied wooden clubs, and occasionally pistols or swords, to intimidate citizens. In Nova Scotia and other eastern provinces, residents vigorously fought these groups (Mercer, 2007, 2010). Violent riots erupted in St. John's in 1794 and Halifax in 1805, and created major social unrest in urban areas of Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Quebec (Lower Canada) (ibid.). Thus, the association of violent gangs with politicians has existed within North American history, literature, and journalism for hundreds of years—long before the moral panics of the late-twentieth century.

Politicians have historically employed gangs in certain vicinities to protect individuals and threaten others, generally by disrupting polling stations and intimidating or brutalizing opposing candidates (Asbury, 1927/2008; Knox, 1994; McCorkle & Miethe, 2002). Maloney (2010) writes an interesting account of the first municipal elections in Toronto, in which street gangs played an integral role. In the 1920s, Frederick M. Thrasher (1927/1963) published the first major gang study in North America based on seven years of ethnographic research in Chicago.⁷ In his study, Thrasher noted the close relation that many gangs held with politicians who would fund their groups in return for certain favours. He argued that “the study of gangs conveys a very vivid impression that the whole structure of municipal politics is at base a complex of personal relationships and mutual personal obligations which make service in the

⁶ This expression has existed since medieval times, but it is most frequently applied to practices of the British Navy in the eighteenth century. While little is written on press-gangs in Canadian contexts—exceptions include Gwyn (2003) and Mercer (2007, 2010)—American and British studies provide many detailed accounts of these events (see Ennis, 2002; Gilje, 2004; and Land, 2009).

⁷ While earlier works that use the term “gang” exist, such as Puffer's (1912/2008) *The Boy and his Gang*, the majority of scholars cite Thrasher as the founder of contemporary gang research (see Klein & Maxson, 2010; Hagedorn, 2007; Wortley & Tanner, 2004).

interest of an impersonal public and an abstract justice very difficult” (pp. 320-321).

Ironically, Thrasher allegedly had to leave Chicago after uncovering such deep political corruption that he feared violent reprisal (Dimitriadis, 2006; Knox, 1994).



Figure 4.1: When questioned about his connection with Canadian Bootlegging, Capone announced: “Do I do business with Canadian racketeers? I don’t even know what street Canada is on!” (Schneider, 2009, p. 206).

During prohibition, representations of gangs in North America changed as bootlegging became a significant source of income for certain groups (Warsh, 1993).⁸ “The forerunners of today’s drug barons and money launderers were not underworld figures but respectable merchant banks and brokerage houses,” writes Behr (1996, p. 130). Throughout this period, eminent families linked to bootlegging like the Bronfmans,

⁸ In Canada, alcohol laws varied from province to province. At one point, the majority of Canada was dry, with only Quebec politicians voting to allow its consumption (Warsh, 1993).

the Kennedys, and the Seagrams were also respected citizens and prominent figures in political circles (Okrent, 2010; Schneider, 2009). In many places, the American bootlegger and gangster Al “Scarface” Capone remains a hero (ibid.). By his death in 1947, Capone was a household name, providing the quintessential image of the American gangster (and looking surprisingly similar to modern politicians (see fig. 4.1)).



Figure 4.2: *The Nation* notes that Liberal Prime Minister Mackenzie King stood accused of being in “an unholy partnership with a gang of millionaire bootleggers” (de Brisay, 1926, p. 213) during prohibition.

In Canada, federal administrations since Trudeau have appeared happy to increase immigration numbers to augment the population of low-wage workers filling service and labour positions; however, these governments have failed to provide adequate assistance for integration, resulting in what a number of authors have called a vertical mosaic of raised and lowered tiles (Fleras, 2009; Porter, 1965). Furthermore, gangs and criminal

organizations such as the Chinese Triads and the Sicilian Mafia or *Cosa Nostra*, as well as biker gangs and drug runners, all established themselves in Canada during the twentieth century (Dickie, 2004; Huff, 1990, 1996, 2002; Schneider, 2009; Varese, 2011). Though the criminal elements of ethnic communities like Chinatown and Little Italy have been greatly exaggerated in popular Canadian discourses (see Anderson, 1991; Harney & Scarpaci, 1981), elements of these gangs continue to thrive in Canada and have been known to exert political pressure (Edwards & Auger, 2004; Klein & Maxson, 2010; Schneider, 2009; Varese, 2011).

Popular culture continually brings this relationship into stark relief as historical and contemporary television shows like *The Wire*, *Boardwalk Empire*, and even *The Simpsons* feature plotlines about politicians who moonlight as gang leaders or publically denounce these criminal organizations while privately making deals with them. Films such as *Serpico* (1973), *The Untouchables* (1987), *Bad Lieutenant* (1992) and *Donnie Brasco* (2004) all rely on audiences to share a common understanding of political corruption and a distrust of state representatives. As Munby (1999) argues, “postwar gangster films told stories of how the average guy was trapped within large determining and corrupting systems” (p. 141). He argues that gangster films have traditionally been so successful because they “revealed how everyone was now living in a kind of gang land” (ibid.). Many popular understandings that link politicians to gangs highlight the doublespeak and rhetorical slights that allow such political manoeuvring to take place. Consequently, undertaking a closer examination of recent political discourses about gangs in Canada allows me to interrogate how these understandings of corruption form through a confluence of popular cultural imaginaries and official rhetoric.



Figure 4.3: Even comedies like *The Simpsons* feature plotlines that involve corrupt officials making backroom deals with gangs, demonstrating the popular belief that we are all “living in a kind of gang land” (Munby, 1999, p. 141).

Speech Acts and Bourdieu

In the mid-twentieth century, J. L. Austin set out to examine the performative nature of language, producing the widely read and highly regarded posthumous book *How to Do Things with Words* (1955/1975). One of his major insights was to subdivide speech acts into three elements: *locutionary* (simply put: saying something); *illocutionary* (the action performed through saying something—apologizing, confessing, promising); and *perlocutionary* (the outcome of saying something—convincing, enraging, persuading). Through the illocutionary elements of speech in particular, Austin examined how one could modify the social and moral order around oneself simply by uttering certain words

within certain contexts. In this way, judges condemn, officers arrest, and gang members threaten without necessarily moving anything more than their lips.

Soon after Austin, John Searle published *Speech Acts* (1969). Among other things, Searle convincingly breaks down the line between descriptive statements and evaluative statements. As I explore below, Searle would argue that a sentence like “The Prime Minister stated ‘our Government will continue to take action to protect young people against the lure of crime and gangs’” entails that “the government *ought to* continue to take action to protect young people against the lure of crime and gangs.” Prior to this work, virtually all linguists and philosophers since Hume took for granted that descriptive statements could not entail ethical or evaluative statements without additional reasoning and argumentation.⁹ Searle demonstrated this line of separation is not only permeable, but in some cases, it is quite possible to derive evaluative statements from descriptive ones.

Pierre Bourdieu’s contribution to these debates stems from his emphasis on the position of the speaker in social and symbolic space. “Practical competence involves not only the capacity to produce grammatical utterances, but *also* the capacity to make oneself heard, believed, obeyed, and so on” writes Thompson (2010) in his introduction to Bourdieu’s *Language and Symbolic Power* (pp. 7-8). As Bourdieu (2010) specifies, “grammar defines meaning only very partially: it is in relation to a market that the complete determination of the signification of discourse occurs” (p. 38). In Canada the

⁹ To illustrate just how controversial this position has been since John Searle (1964) first introduced it, see his many critiques and replies: Bruening (1971), Carey (1975), Crawford (1979), Downing (1972), Dyck (1981), Flew (1964), Fried (2006), Gewirth (1973), Hannaford (1972), Hudson (1965), Jobe (1965), Kadane and Larkey (1983), Mavrodes (1964), McClellan and Komisar (1964), Mitchell (1968), Morscher (1972), Nielsen (1979), Samuels (1973), Sloman (1969), Wilkins (1970), Witkowski (1975), Yovel (2000).

market for law and order discourses appears to be growing, as indicated by the success of the Conservative government, which pledged to increase criminal penalties and penitentiary funding while taking away certain rights from criminals.

As Bourdieu (2010) argues, “in politics, ‘to say is to do,’ that is, it is to get people to believe that you can do what you say and, in particular, to get them to know and recognize the principles of di-vision of the social world” (p. 190). Using speech acts theories and Bourdieu’s interventions, I argue that the Prime Minister’s Office successfully conjured fears of violent criminal organizations in the minds of many voters while opening the definition of gangs to include members of the opposition parties it sought to defeat in the election. With the Prime Minister’s position in the political spotlight, the Conservative Party was able to blur the line between description and prescription while using the imagery of gangs to vilify others in the public sphere. Leaving aside the issues of crime policy, in this Chapter I turn to a number of examples from major Canadian newspapers during the time leading up to and just after the 2011 federal election to explore how the anti-gang discourses in the mediated political landscape extended into the non-criminal realm.

Canadian Election Coverage

As Kennedy and I noted in Chapter Two, the term “gang” appears in Canadian newspapers thousands of times each year. Some political commentators refer to all Canadian parties as gangs. For example, *The Globe and Mail* reporter Jeffrey Simpson (2010) writes, “in a normal democratic culture, when people are disillusioned or angry or disappointed with one gang in power, they close their eyes, hold their noses, and vote in

the official opposition” (p. A15). And covering a campaign stop in Quebec, Authier (2011a), referring to all the party candidates, writes that “the gang’s all here” (p. A3). Elsewhere, he quotes a source who describes the current political system as “paralyzed in its bi-partisanary and gang warfare” (Authier, 2011b, p. A3). These kinds of descriptions are equally spread across the political spectrum just as Thrasher (1927/1963) described an election in 1926 where all parties arranged illegal gang interventions in roughly equal amounts: “in every precinct where votes were stolen for certain Republican candidates, there were also votes stolen for certain Democratic candidates. It was a perfect bi-partisan alliance” (p. 325). On other occasions, commentators use the term “gang” humorously to describe politicians. For example, Fotheringham (2010) labels the federal candidates “the boring gang of four” (p. A19), while Vaughan (2010) refers to them offhandedly as the “four little horsies of the apocalypse” (p. R1). He writes, “No, those are not my nicknames for the four federal leaders working the barbecue circuit (my pet names for that gang are unprintable).” While not all readers may find these comments funny, few are likely to assert they represent major political concerns.

The real power of gangs in mediated political discourses appears when candidates and news commentators direct the term toward specific competitors. “Gang” floats from the lips of journalists and politicians in all levels of politics and along many ideological lines. In Toronto, Doolittle (2011) satirically refers to Councillor Adam Vaughan as “an outspoken leader with ties to council’s left-wing gang” (p. GT2), while Gee (2010) mentions Mayor Rob Ford’s “gang of like-minded councillors” (p. A1). Provincially, Blatchford (2010) refers to the days when the “inept Rae gang” (p. A20) in Ontario made her life as a journalist easy. In Vancouver, former energy minister Bill Bennett created a

stir when he accused BC Premier Gordon Campbell of being an abusive bully and stated “I rather expect the premier’s gang will want to eject me” (Bailey & Hume, 2010, p. A11).¹⁰ Less than one month later, BC headlines filled with references to a “gang of 13” that ousted NDP leader Carole James (Mason, 2010; Mickleburgh, 2010).

It is difficult to say definitively which media organizations or politicians in history introduced the imagery of gangs and gunslingers into elections coverage. It is clear that, regardless of its origins, gangs appeared prominently in the 2011 federal election. And, in this case, such discourses integrated best with the Conservative’s law-and-order platform. Freed (2010) provides the most explicit example of this fit with his playful description before the election officially started:

Now you can smell an election burning like leaves in the fall air as Canadian politicians attack each other as savagely as ... U.S. politicians. Last week saw The Gunfight at the Ottawa Corral where Iggy Earpe and his gang narrowly outgunned Doc Harper’s gang over the long-gun registry bill. (p. A2)

This story is tongue-in-cheek, but it highlights something that appears frequently, in less explicit ways, in daily political journalism.

Without a doubt, the most successful use of gang imagery to generate political force appeared when Harper successfully labelled the opposition parties as such prior to his 2011 election victory. Before the election became immanent toward the end of 2010, Harper had already brought in allies who would support his tough-on-gangs approach.

¹⁰ Alternatively, in Yaffe’s (2011b) profile of Campbell, he writes that the premier worked well with the federal government and “refused to join any gang-ups by provincial premiers” (p. B3).

Former Toronto Police Chief, York Regional Police Chief, and Commissioner of the Ontario Provincial Police Julian Fantino entered the House of Commons in November 2010, while “anti-gang fighter” Don Meredith joined the Senate in December that year in what Ibbitson (2010) described as a “one-two law-and-order punch that the Conservatives hope will pay dividends” (p. A10). By February 2011, Conservatives had launched attack ads directed at the Bloc Quebecois for voting against street-gang legislation, insinuating that they were weak on crime and sympathetic to gang members (Leblanc, 2011). During this time, McMartin (2010) pulled no punches, describing those opposing Harper as “the gang of jackals who have the gall to call themselves the Loyal Opposition” (p. A4), while a *Toronto Star* editorial referred to the Liberals as “a gang that can’t count” (“Liberal’s tactical goof,” 2010, p. A26).

During federal debates, Harper frequently accused the opposition of ganging up on him, perpetuating an image that both print and broadcast media reiterated *ad nauseum*. The *Montreal Gazette* referred to debates as “a four-against-one gangup on Harper” (“Hard and fast Rules”, 2011, p. A22). Antoine Bilodeau, Associate Professor of Political Science at Concordia University, complained that “the four-person debates lasted forever, and everyone kept ganging up on Harper” (cited in Johnston, 2011, p. A6). And Yaffe (2011a) argued in a point that becomes even more salient in retrospect that “Harper became the subject of a threeway gang-up that, ironically, will help him with messaging about a demon opposition coalition” (p. A2).¹¹

¹¹ Ironically, Yaffe (2011c) suggested that Green Party candidate Elizabeth May was able to join the leaders’ debates in 2008 because of the public outrage “that all the male party leaders appeared to be ‘ganging up’ on her” (p. A5). Evidently, that anger had subsided by 2011 and she was unable to return for the televised debates.

Michael Ignatieff challenged the Prime Minister on his characterisation of the opposition parties during a televised debate:

This is a debate. It's not some pesky little irrelevance that gets in the way of your power. This is how democracy works. I ask questions. I hold you accountable. It isn't bickering. This is what democracy is about. It's about time you respected it. (*Global News*, 2011)

Unfortunately, the moderator moved from Ignatieff's challenge to another question before Harper could respond. Later in the debate, however, the issue of crime and gangs arose directly. Not surprisingly, each candidate argued that he was interested in public safety and opposed crime. Again, Ignatieff attempted to subvert Harper's speaking points: "Crime is always a serious problem...but you have to understand that crime in our country is not increasing, the politics of fear is designed to exploit and create fear. Mr. Harper specializes in the politics of fear and the crime agenda" (*Global News*, 2011). And again, Harper argued for stricter punishment, insinuating the other politicians did not support his anti-gang policies and were therefore soft on crime. Sticking to this message allowed Harper to remain firm: he opposed any and every gang—criminal, political, or otherwise.

Some journalists and politicians outside the Conservative circle attempted to use such "gang" language against Harper and his party; however, they were not successful in getting this imagery to stick. Bloc MP Michel Guimond called Conservative MPs "a gang of 'yes men' who defend Harper" (Dougherty, 2011, p. A6). After Conservatives legitimated the idea that unemployed women in Canada could work as escorts, NDP MP Pat Martin argued that "this is such a contradiction for the holier than thou family

values gang” (Brennan, 2010, p. A1). Elsewhere, Brownstein (2010) alludes to a “gang of wild and crazy Tories” (C9), Barmak (2011) refers to a “Tory gang of cynics and liars” (p. IN2), and a reader from Cambridge wrote to *The Toronto Star* stating that she feared the consequences of “what will happen to Canada if this man and his gang get a majority” (“Election 2011,” 2011, p. IN7).

After a kerfuffle about the census, James Travers (2010) wrote in July, 2010 that “Jarred into wakefulness by the sound of summer gunfire, Canadians are confronted by the spectacle of a wounded Prime Minister leading a gang that can’t shoot straight” (p. A6). At this point, the election seemed anybody’s race. By May, 2011, however, it was clear who won this gunfight. The opposition quickly became defensive in the campaign because of their perceived collusion in Parliament, while the Conservative’s tough-on-crime policies and solitary approach within debates made it difficult to paint them as a “gang” in popular media discourses.



Figure 4.4: Prime Minister Stephen Harper (far left) accused the other part leaders of ganging up against him during the 2011 federal election, establishing a motif that allowed him to avoid certain issues by presenting the debates as unfair forms of bullying.

When the debates subsided, not only had Harper successfully conjured fears of a coalition of political parties ganging up against him, he had also established a motif that allowed him to avoid future confrontations, even when others might consider them part of a necessary democratic debate. As Bourdieu (2010) argues, the symbolic domain recreates the physical world through the manipulation of *forms*. “It is only when this is realized that one can turn linguistic analysis into an instrument of political critique, and rhetoric into a science of symbolic power” (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 213). For example, when issues of medical care arose among the provinces in May, 2011, political columnist Andre Picard (2011) pointed out that “Going into a room where all the premiers can gang up on him is not the current PM’s style” (p. A16). One sees here Bourdieu’s (2010) concept of symbolic power at work, “a power which presupposes recognition, that is, misrecognition of the violence that is exercised through it” (p. 209). Not only is it inconceivable to this political commentator that Harper would enter a debate in which he was not ensured victory, but he (mis)recognizes many dissenting voices as a “gang up” rather than a majority consensus that makes Harper appear a victim of bullying rather than an outvoted member of a democracy. This is symbolic violence at work, a violence which, in changing the form of discourse, changes the very objects of discussion. Thus, Harper avoids being typecast as a grumpy loner or a tyrannical leader, and instead becomes a lone ranger bringing reason to a group of bickering politicians who would otherwise bully, intimidate, and let criminals reign.

Leaving aside the question of actual criminal gangs and the best ways to approach this justice issue, I would like to examine how the Harper government was able to manipulate such discourses within the political field. In the middle of the campaign, the

Prime Minister pledged \$45 million to the Youth Gang Prevention Fund, arguing that he “will continue to take action to protect young people against the lure of crime and gangs” (PM announces, 2011). Taking this statement as exemplary of the Conservatives’ campaign message, one can convert it *à la* Searle into the statement: “the Prime Minister ought to to protect young people from gangs” by plotting a transformation as follows:

1. The Prime Minister utters the words “our Government will continue to take action to protect young people against the lure of crime and gangs.”
2. The Prime Minister promises to protect young people from gangs.
3. The Prime Minister places himself under (undertook) an obligation to protect young people from gangs.
4. The Prime Minister is under an obligation to protect young people from gangs.
5. The Prime Minister ought to protect young people from gangs.

This five-step process deriving an *ought* from an *is* may seem obvious and uncontroversial to many readers—of course the government *ought* to prevent gang involvement, especially if it is an increasing concern to citizens. But as the press coverage demonstrates, the definition of “gangs” can stretch to include party representatives and other groups of non-criminals. Consequently, Harper’s obligation blurs. Logically, if (a) gangs exist, then (b) the government should protect citizens, specifically impressionable youth, from these groups. However, if the leaders of the opposition parties are labelled “gangs” during the election, the message seems to be: if

(a) a gang of opposition leaders exists, then (b) the government should protect citizens, specifically impressionable youth, from these groups. Of course, critical readers could easily point out flaws in this argument. For instance, even if the parameters were all in place to make the first statement valid (e.g., Harper is genuine about his promise, he is in a position to fulfil it, he is not contradicted, etc.), there remains the facts that: a) criminal gangs \neq politicians; b) gangs are never satisfactorily defined in the first place; and c) many scholars remain unconvinced of the validity of Searle's method of deriving an *ought* from an *is*.¹²

I argue, however, that the government disseminates its message not through a process of analytic reasoning akin to Searle's own arguments, but simply through a visceral understanding that if gangs exist then the government ought to protect its citizens from them. If *a* then *b*. One does not need to provide sound reasoning or rigorous analysis of the rationale behind such movements.¹³ In fact, members of the Conservative Party have traditionally sought *less* supporting evidence that gangs represent a major problem; they dramatically cut funding to Statistics Canada while claiming exponential increases in criminal gangs across the nation, supporting their assertions with virtually no hard evidence.¹⁴ Elsewhere, Canadian organizations either hold competing definitions of "gangs" or none at all (see Chapter Two). Thus, Harper's claim that gangs are an

¹² Again, see Searle's many critiques: Bruening (1971), Carey (1975), Crawford (1979), Downing (1972), Dyck (1981), Flew (1964), Fried (2006), Gewirth (1973), Hannaford (1972), Hudson (1965), Jobe (1965), Kadane and Larkey (1983), Mavrodes (1964), McClellan and Komisar (1964), Mitchell (1968), Morscher (1972), Nielsen (1979), Samuels (1973), Sloman (1969), Wilkins (1970), Witkowski (1975), Yovel (2000).

¹³ See Ahmed (2004), Gould (2009), Lutz & Abu-Lughod (1990), and Morrell (2010) for recent debates and scholarship on the politics of emotions.

¹⁴ The only study that exists for Canadians on the number of gangs in the country is produced by a corporation led by Michael Chettleburgh, a self-proclaimed gang expert whose public *vita* outlines no significant qualifications or training on the subject.

increasing concern is contentious at best. Yes, The National Youth Gang Survey reports more than 400 youth gangs and more than 7,000 gang members across Canada (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003). But the government is remiss to acknowledge that the survey measures the number of gangs by how many individuals “the respondent or other responsible persons in their agency or community were willing to identify or classify as a gang” (Astwood Strategy Corporation 2003, p. 5). In other words, the number of gangs is based on how many gangs the respondent *believes* exist. As many gang scholars argue, the numbers can easily be manipulated (Cummings & Monti, 1993; Curry & Decker, 1998; Huff, 1990, 1996, 2002; Klein, 1995, 2007; Knox, 1994; McCorkle & Miethe, 1990; Wortley & Tanner, 2004).¹⁵ Thus, by opening the definition of gangs and promising to defend citizens from them, the Prime Minister relies on gangs to (rhetorically) support his campaign—much like politicians in North America have done (physically) for the last few centuries.

¹⁵ As I mentioned in Chapter One, Maxson and Klein (1990) demonstrate how the Los Angeles Police Department measured twice as many gang crimes using their definition than what they would have found using the Chicago Police Department’s definition. Such discrepancies seem to be the rule rather than the exception in gang statistics.



Figure 4.5: Stephen Harper (centre) successfully positioned himself as a victim of the other parties' gangsterism while calling for tougher laws on criminal gangs.

Conclusion

Despite the emergence of the Robocall scandal misinforming voters about polling station locations in the last federal election, Canada has come a long way from the days when thugs would beat and intimidate voters to help their candidates win elections.

Nevertheless, “gangs” remain powerful in mediated political discourses. Journalists and political commentators have a duty to critically interrogate the ways gang imagery influences coverage of candidates and their platforms. There is no doubt that criminal gangs pose a danger to the wellbeing of communities within Canada. The arguments within this chapter do not seek to downplay the violence of crime in the country. Despite these realities, however, certain political parties, as well as certain media commentators, clearly wield symbolic power by appealing to the negative imagery associated with street gangs to vilify opposing candidates. This strategy, while not confined to the Conservative

Party, is most effective for those seeking to secure the power of the right hand of the state while stripping the left hand of its ability to perform meaningful work in the realm of education, social assistance, and welfare.

When Thrasher observed gangs in the 1920s, his major political concern involved collusions of government officials and violent criminal groups. Today, politicians continue to use gangs—but in significantly different ways. Prime Minister Harper claimed that “gangs are an increasing concern across the country” (Youth Gang Prevention Fund, 2011), using gangs to support his tough-on-crime platform that involves dramatically increasing funding to police and prisons (despite the falling crime rates), while taking away funding from social programs like affordable daycare and educational bursaries, which help to prevent gangs in the first place (see Cummings & Monti, 1993; Curry & Decker, 1998; Hagedorn, 2007, 2008; Huff, 1990, 1996, 2002; Klein, 1995, 2007; Klein & Maxson, 2010; Richardson & Skott-Myhre, 2012). Furthermore, he successfully characterized the opposition parties as “gangs” who banded their numbers to intimidate and unfairly censure him as he stood alone against a mob of suited gangsters. This strategy reveals the power of gangs in contemporary Canadian politics and represents a significant concern for democratic communication. As Thrasher (1927/1963) observed nearly a century ago, “the political boss finds gangs, whether composed of boys or of men above voting age, very useful in promoting the interests of his machine” (p. 313). It may be wise to reconsider these words in the context of the mediated political debates we see in North America today.

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5. “Where the Gangs Rule”: Symbolic Violence in Suburbia¹

Along with television, classic cinema, and the promise of a better future, suburbia became a staple within the popular memory of North Americans after the Second World War. Since then, many large cities have garnered attention for the violence and gang activity lurking just outside their urban centres. Newspapers, scholarly articles, and popular media accounts, however, continue to represent these cases as exceptions to the rule, anomalies within an otherwise homogeneous arrangement of banal, white, middle-class communities. By examining depictions of suburbs outside of Los Angeles, Paris, and Toronto, I explore Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence, using Lynn Spigel’s and Michel Foucault’s notions of popular memory to investigate this trend. Ultimately, I examine why contemporary news media refuse to move away from the suburbs’ idyllic reputation, despite myriad contradictory examples. I conclude by arguing that journalists must form more nuanced conceptions of the suburbs, lest they continue presenting suburban gangs as a new phenomenon for another forty years.

¹ A version of this chapter has been published: Richardson, C. (2011). Defining Suburbs: Representation and Symbolic Violence Just Outside the City. *Public: Art, Culture, Ideas*, 43, 41-53.

The suburbs are doomed...the former homes will make amazing hangouts for gangs, weirdoes, and people performing illegal activities. The pretend gates at the entranceways to gated communities will become real, and the charred stubs of previous white-collar homes will serve only to make the still-standing structures creepier and more exotic. (Coupland, 2010a, p. F6)

Introduction

In the fall of 2010, Canadian author and cultural critic Douglas Coupland delivered a series of predictions during a CBC Massey Lecture on the future.² Among his many prophecies and neologisms, Coupland argued that the suburbs will disappear, “especially those E.T., California-style suburbs” (p. F6). His vision of suburbia becoming a space for “gangs, weirdoes and people performing illegal activities” (ibid.), however, is not far from the representation of certain suburbs today. Many communities in the Western world—those outside of Los Angeles, Paris, and Toronto for example—already garner attention for their dystopian qualities, which include proliferating crime, violence, and youth gangs. Toronto journalists have called the Jane-Finch neighbourhood in the northwest end “a breeding ground for vandalism (“Jane-Finch area,” 1978, p. A4) where “teens wreak havoc nightly” (Carey, 1978, p. A4) since the 1970s, and, more recently, a failed “experiment with urban planning” resulting in a suburb “where the gangs rule” (Friesen, 2007, p. A17). In the city’s east end, mainstream news media have similarly

² This work later appeared as *Player One: What is to become of us: A novel in five hours*. Notably, mention of the suburbs is absent in the “Future Legend” at the end of the novel, in which Coupland provides a glossary of important terms.

described Scarborough as “aesthetically bleak, with its pasty residential neighbourhoods, dreary apartment complexes, ubiquitous strip malls, no-tell motels, rigid thoroughfares and a used car lot on every corner” (DiManno, 2007, p. A2). For more than three decades, Canadian news headlines have introduced both Jane-Finch and Scarborough with titles such as “Suburbia gone sour: The Jane-Finch tragedy” (Heller & Tesher, 1979, p. A1) and “The Scarborough Curse: Portrait of Toronto’s Unluckiest Suburb” (Gillmor, 2007, p. 86). Yet these news organizations continuously present such spaces as anomalies, suburbs that somehow failed to live up to their middle-class ambitions and do not fit the popular understanding of suburbia. These suburbs do not resemble the ones Malvina Reynolds sings about in “Little Boxes,” a satire of the homogeneity and banality of sanitized, cookie-cutter lifestyles. Implicit within the condemnation of these Toronto suburbs—similar stories could be told of the outskirts of Berlin, Johannesburg, London, and, perhaps most notably, Paris—is the suggestion that perhaps suburbia is not as homogeneous, bland, and peaceful as popular representations lead many to believe.

The image of the suburbs lingering within popular memory is that of white picket fences, middle-class boulevards lined with golden brown oak trees leading to large bungalows and two-storey McMansions where (male) family members return home after work to see (white) children playing happily after school *à la Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. These television touchstones, along with their modern successors *The Simpsons*, *Home Improvement*, *Married with Children*, and *King of the Hill*, perpetuate a conception of suburbia that is increasingly detached from many lived

experiences. Yet this understanding endures within popular culture, influencing reporters, scholars, and cultural producers to treat problem suburbs as exceptional.³



Figure 5.1: Popular television shows like *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) continue to align with dominant tropes of the suburbs, despite the presence of visible minorities, gangs, violence, and poverty that have existed within suburbia for decades.

In this chapter, I explore the disjuncture between popular conceptions of suburbia and the bleak realities many of its residents currently face. I argue that three crucial elements work in unison to preserve this image. The first is the tendency to represent suburbia as a singular, homogeneous entity outside of time and space. This universalizing view fails to acknowledge the diversity of one urban periphery from another, leading to a

³ In this sense, I include journalism within the broader notion of popular culture. As Hall et al. (1978) note, journalists frequently perpetuate common-sense understandings of the world not by informing readers and audiences of what is new, but by telling them what they already know. In this way, journalism works alongside sitcoms, melodramas, and music videos to perpetuate popular memory, a term I discuss in more detail below.

symbolic violence that overlooks the geographic landscapes and specific time periods in which communities exist. The second aspect is the position of American hegemony within this universalizing tendency. Suburbs in the United States, along with their popular culture representations, are perhaps the central force in reproducing the idealized vision that many Westerners hold. While New York, Chicago, and other major US cities historically concentrated working-class, minority populations in the “inner city,” other Western metropolises have explicitly placed public housing outside of the city, creating areas quite different from their American counterparts (Gallie & Paugam, 2000; Soullignac, 2001; Wacquant, 2008). These spaces, however, become absorbed within a nostalgic, Americanized debate that fails to recognize their unique properties. Foreign suburbs in areas like Clichy-sous-Bois and La Courneuve outside of Paris are simply deemed “inner cities” by American journalists and scholars, completely negating their physical locations in order to better fit within North American popular memory. The third problem focuses on language. The use of the term “suburb” is regularly deployed to describe idyllic spaces while remaining conspicuously absent in representations of poor and/or ethnically diverse communities, despite the fact that *suburb* defines only a location and *not* a quality of life or a demographic composition. This problem of language—or a lack thereof—to describe marginalized suburbs cannot be underestimated. Many authors argue that the suburbs greatly influence public policies (Baxandall & Ewen, 2001; Oliver, 2001; Thomas, 1998). In this case, the less affluent and culturally auspicious regions on the peripheries of cities are left out of debates, erased by those spaces that blend more easily within the language available to scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals. One

of the tasks for artists and cultural producers must be to break away from these ready-made images and to represent such spaces in new and more challenging ways.

In the next section, I establish a working definition of “suburbia.” From there, I examine the suburbs of three distinct cities—Los Angeles, Paris, and Toronto—to interrogate how these problems of representation play out within North American journalism. Ultimately, I conclude that many spaces work to define what a suburb *is not*; but no quintessential suburb exists to define what a suburb *is*. This lack of defining suburbs makes the term a slippery signifier, one that saturates popular memory by appealing to a sense of security, safety, homogeneity, and family values without specifying when or where this space can actually be found. There may indeed be pockets of affluence outside the major cities of the industrialized world. But a perfect storm of gentrification in the urban cores, changes in immigration trends, social isolation, and economic downturns have increased financial insecurity in these spaces and led to a sea change in suburbia. Acknowledging this trend and combatting this stubborn notion of what constitutes a suburb presents a considerable challenge within the fields of art, journalism, literature, and academe.

Defining suburbs

By definition, a suburb is a transitory, liminal space. The word describes “a residential district lying just beyond or just within the boundaries of a city” (Barber, 2004). It derives from the Old French *suburbe* or the Latin *suburbium*, both of which amend the prefix “sub” (near to) with the word for city (*urbs*, *urbis*). Myriad scholars present their own definitions of what constitutes a modern suburb (Binford, 1985; Clapson, 2003;

Fishman, 1989; Kelly, 1989; Thomas, 1998). An agreement exists in virtually all of these accounts that the term refers to residential spaces on the peripheries of cities. Nowhere in such definitions are there qualifications about race, income, criminality, etc. Thorns' (1972) popular description of suburbia defines it in four ways: 1) a proximity to the city; 2) an intermediate position between urban centre and countryside; 3) accessibility by car or train (e.g., convenient for those who work within the city, but live outside it); and 4) a general dependence on towns or cities for goods and services. While this space has existed for centuries, it expanded exponentially in Western metropolises after the Second World War.

On a single day in 1949, developers sold 1,400 houses outside of New York City in Levittown, a place many consider one of the first modern suburbs (Gans, 1982; Kelly, 1989; Harris, 2010; Thomas, 1998). With the rise of Levittown and other large communities based on affordable housing outside the urban core, the entity that Thomas (1998) calls the United States of Suburbia took shape. "Even severe critics must admit," argued Barbara Kelly (1989), "the 100 million houses of the United States represent the most distinguishing feature of its civilization, more revealing of American culture than convertibles, baseball, skyscrapers, or aircraft carriers" (pp. xxi-xii). Politicians pandering to the populist vote represented the suburbs as the last bastion of wholesome, traditional American family values. The Reagan and Bush administrations, along with the conservative tide in England with Thatcher and Mulroney in Canada, left a heavy footprint in both the development of suburbia and the devastation of many social and economic safety nets in the countrysides and inner cities. Indeed, as Kelly (1989) argues, the spaces to benefit most from Reaganomics and the like have been the suburbs, where

politicians diverted taxes from inner-city programs and agricultural subsidies to support suburban mega malls and superhighways.

Studies of suburbia within the disciplines of urban planning, geography, and sociology are overwhelming in both size and breadth. By comparison, relatively little research appears within media and cultural studies on representations of the suburbs. Scholars have traditionally tackled this subject in the guise of white intellectual angst—Riesman's (1950/2001) *The Lonely Crowd*, Whyte's (1956/2002) *The Organization Man*, which blend with the popular fiction of Richard Yates, George Mann, and more recently, John Cheever and Jonathan Franzen. While these works are critical of an idealized suburbia, their criticisms generally confront the conformity, dissatisfaction, and economic irresponsibility of white-collar, middle-class families, largely ignoring the other populations that comprise these spaces.⁴ Scholars studying the representation of the suburbs tend to approach their research more elliptically than their economic and geographic counterparts. Rarely do authors use actual representations of the suburbs, such as those found in newspapers or magazines, to explore popular media discourses.⁵ Instead, the term becomes a stand-in for a more general critique of conformity, passivity, and middle-class malaise in texts like Spigel's (2001) *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* and Douglas's *Television Families: Is Something Wrong in Suburbia?* In these cases, this abstracted space provides a convenient straw

⁴ The discourse on representation and the suburbs has also taken on the question of gender, most notably with Betty Friedan (1963/2001) and, more recently, race and ethnicity (Harris & Larkham, 1999; Perin, 1988; Vincino, 2008). However, it is often subsumed within this discourse of white, middle-class communities.

⁵ Two clear exceptions are Korinek's (2000) *Roughing it in the Suburbs: Reading Chatelaine Magazine in the Fifties and Sixties* and Sachsman & Sloat's (1985) *The Press and the Suburbs: The Daily Newspapers of New Jersey*.

man for those seeking to challenge the heteronormative, white privilege and affluence that suburbia presumably embodies. In other words, the suburbs make an easy target through which critics attack comfortable groups and the hegemonic lifestyles they represent. But do the suburbs of Canada, the United States, and Western Europe really hold this privileged position? To explore this question, I turn to three distinct suburbs that help to illustrate the specific ways in which North American journalists conceive suburbia.

Leaving Los Angeles: The disavowal of difference

For a brief period in the early 1950s, President George H. W. Bush and his family lived in Compton, California (Bush, 2000). At this time, Compton was as idyllic a suburb as any other. Just beyond the city limits of Los Angeles, Compton lies within the greater Los Angeles County. The area has changed dramatically over the last half-century as a result of white flight and capital disinvestment, particularly after the riots of the 1960s (Hofstadter & Wallace, 1971; Horne, 1995). Along with Watts, Inglewood, and a number of other smaller communities, it became famous as a gangland in the 1980s and 1990s (Richardson & Skott-Myhre, 2012). The geographic location, however, remains the same; Compton is just outside of Los Angeles. Yet, I would argue it is easier to imagine this space as a “suburb” when picturing Bush Jr. running around the yard in 1950 than when envisioning the infamous space represented in NWA’s “Straight Outta Compton.”

Perhaps this one-sided vision can best be understood through television’s love affair with a certain kind of suburb. As Spigel (2001) notes, the post-war suburbs developed in conjunction with the medium of television. Both of these quintessential

American entities became emblematic of an ideal, utopic vision of the future in which many North Americans experienced their lives through the frames of reference they saw on sitcoms and melodramas. “Television was the ideal companion for these suburban homes” writes Spigel (p. 33). She points to the Federal Housing Administration’s support of redlining practices that ensured new developments would be “designed to purify communal spaces, to sweep away urban clutter” (p. 34) as well as to perpetuate an antiseptic model that became “the reigning aesthetic at the heart of the postwar suburb” (ibid.). Many districts openly—and legally—prevented Jewish, African-American, and Asian families from purchasing homes in the suburbs around cities like Los Angeles, thereby allowing wealthy, white, Christian families to have their pick of housing on the edges of town (Fishman, 1989; Horne, 1995; Spigel, 2001). These practices, however, all but disappeared by the 1970s with the implementation of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, leading to an influx of upwardly mobile groups of varying ethnicities.

As the demographics of communities changed drastically, and urban sprawl crept further into the countryside, the image of the suburbs in popular entertainment as well as in news and current events remained stable. In part, Spigel’s work on popular memory helps to explain this divergence. By conducting interviews in which she asked students in the twenty-first century about the lives of women in the 1950s, Spigel found that many students based their understanding on television personalities like June Cleaver and Marion Cunningham. “These students seemed to disavow their disbelief in television in order to legitimate the idea that women’s lives have substantially improved since the 1950s,” writes Spigel (p. 370). “In essence, then, they used evidence about the past that

they themselves deemed faulty in order to make truth claims about progress in the present” (ibid.).

While Spigel focuses primarily on students’ understandings of women during the post-war years, her findings help to explain how and why the dominant representation of suburbia remains that of idyllic, white, middle-class neighbourhoods when many suburbs today do not fit this mould. Spigel (2001) builds on Foucault’s concept of popular memory, defining it as “a form of storytelling through which people make sense of their own lives and culture” (p. 363). She argues that this understanding of the world exists on an entirely different level than academic thinking. Thus, we can speak of two histories occurring simultaneously—one based upon empirical evidence and logical argumentation, the other based on belief, sentiment, and observations of popular media. She argues that despite the knowledge that such cultural narratives may not be accurate, they remain significant tools in one’s understanding of the world and its history because they speak “to the concerns of the present in a way that professional histories often do not” (Spigel, p. 376).

Foucault (1996) posits that popular memory is written by the people who are “barred from writing, from producing their books themselves, from drawing up their own historical accounts” (p. 123). Instead, these populations create their own version of events in less professional or rigorous ways. However, business interests can co-opt such folk cultures through mass-produced cultural artefacts that work to structure such memories. Pointing specifically to television and cinema, Foucault argues that “people are shown not what they were, but what they must remember having been” (ibid.). The intention, he elaborates, is to “impose on people a framework in which to interpret the present” (p.

130). I would extend this concept further to incorporate Bourdieu's (1990) notion of symbolic violence in which the dominant narrative is positioned as a universal truth, effectively erasing or denying alternative understandings of places, people, and events. "Symbolic power, in this sense, is a power of 'world making,'" writes Bourdieu (p. 137). "Social classifications, as is the case in archaic societies, which often work via dualist operations, masculine/feminine, high/low, strong/weak, etc., organize the perception of the social world and, in certain conditions, can really organize the world itself" (ibid.). In this way, popular news discourses continue to present the suburbs as peaceful (rather than violent), safe (rather than criminal), and homogenous (rather than diverse). Any example to the contrary must be rationalized as an exception to the rule or else this symbolic power is compromised.

Returning to Compton, this suburb of Los Angeles changed significantly throughout the 1960s to the point that it received attention in national publications for its deviation from popular conceptions. In a 1972 headline, *The New York Times* declares: "City in California, 72% Black, Looks to Future Despite Woes" (Caldwell, 1972, p. 18). By this time, Bush and his friends had left the neighbourhood and the reporter laments this change much more blatantly than political correctness would allow today:

[T]here is no town west of the Mississippi more black than Compton. In this city, the Mayor is black, the city manager is black, the schools are run by blacks and most of the people who live here are black. Compton is a city that never figured to be black. It did not want blacks. It even tried to keep the blacks out. But it failed. (Caldwell, 1972, p. 18)

The journalist elaborates how the affluent white families of the 1950s left *en mass* when African Americans began moving into the neighbourhood, and now the current residents are struggling with the aftermath in social infrastructure. Writing about a city that went from 4% to 72% black in two decades, Caldwell (1972) does not debate the fact that Compton remains a residential space on the outskirts of Los Angeles, yet he argues that “Compton lost its bedroom community atmosphere and became an urban city locked in white suburbia” (p. 18). This statement, which seems to reject the idea that Compton is still a suburb because of its new African-American population, reveals much about the impossibility of representing the suburbs in more than one particular way.

By the 1970s, a popular understanding existed of what the suburbs looked like, particularly in relation to other spaces such as the inner city. Compton was a place that failed to assimilate to these expectations that were internalized within North Americans’ habitus. As Bourdieu (1990) explains:

What allows saying that a particular practice or property ‘looks’ (*fait*) this or that [...] is the sense of the game acquired through prolonged immersion in the game, a sense of positioning (*placement*), which Goffman calls the ‘sense of one’s place’, the sense of the position occupied in social space, which always involves a *sense of the place of others* and, more precisely, a practical mastery of the two independent and homologous spaces and of their correspondence. (pp. 113-114)

Compton breaks with the conventional distinction between the safe, friendly, “bedroom community” outside of the city and the crime-ridden, ethnically diverse communities associated with the “inner city” and so it becomes displaced figuratively and literally in

the mainstream news media. A more recent *New York Times* article demonstrates how this trend continues: “Recent years have not been kind to the suburban city of Compton. In the 1980’s, gangs provided the notoriety. In the decade that followed there was corruption at City Hall and a state takeover of the city’s schools. Last week the city came under further scrutiny” (Whitaker, 2001, p. 24). With these sustained frameworks of exception, journalists help to keep the popular memory of suburbia intact, repeatedly, despite the presence of tangible examples that should call it into question. Ultimately, the fact that articles dwell on the idea of Compton not fitting in with the idea of suburbia reinforces the dominant understanding of suburbia as a safe and prosperous community.

The Americanization of debate: *banlieues* versus inner cities

Compton is one of many spaces in America that fail to assimilate within dominant narratives of suburbia. But perhaps the largest discrepancy between narratives of the inner city and the suburbs exists in American representations of the French *banlieues*. In a translation of Bourdieu’s (1998) lectures on television, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, an American sociology professor at Columbia University, translates *banlieue* as “inner city,” appending to this revision a brief note that states: “The French ‘suburbs’ [*banlieues*] correspond to the American ‘inner city,’ which is the translation used here” (p. 90). This small instance speaks volumes of the inability of many North Americans, even high-profile scholars, to see problems or flaws in their own backyards, so to speak. Rather than use the literal translation “suburb,” Ferguson switches the term for inner city.⁶ In doing

⁶ While *banlieues* have specific negative connotations, Wacquant (2008) writes that the term “designates a peripheral town or zone administratively attached to a larger urban centre” (p. 4). Notably, in his translation

so, I argue, she posits that suburban violence, marginality, and political disenfranchisement would be incomprehensible to her American readers, and therefore she symbolically transplants the problematic suburbs back into the inner cities where they align more closely to dominant schemes of perceptions. Interestingly, Ferguson was the principal translator for Bourdieu et al.'s (1999) *The Weight of the World* one year later, in which the authors question notions of space and place in relation to social inequalities. Bourdieu writes, and Ferguson translates, "One can break with misleading appearances and with the errors inscribed in substantialist thought about *place* only through a rigorous analysis of the relations between the structures of social space and those of physical space" (emphasis in original, p. 123). This stark simplification in Ferguson's translation of *On Television* is surprising considering her involvement in such debates, but perhaps understandable when considering America's role in establishing dominant representations and discourses of suburbia and the inner city.

Another telling example of this transference in popular memory comes in the wake of the violence in France during 2005. As riots swept the outskirts of many French cities, *New York Times* reporter Craig Smith (2005) deployed what is now a common trope by comparing the *banlieues* of Paris to American inner cities. "The violence [...] reflects something that any American who lived through the urban upheavals of the 1960's, or the 1992 riots in Los Angeles, might recognize: a dangerous degree of isolation felt by a growing segment of its population, especially its young" (p. D3). The alliteration Smith slips into this statement, "urban upheavals," is interesting considering

of Bourdieu's (2003) *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market 2*, Wacquant, who was born and raised in France, translates *banlieue* as "the urban periphery" (p. 59).

where many riots actually occurred—Watts, Compton, and other black suburbs of Los Angeles. These were residential neighbourhoods outside the urban core. However, they were neither white nor wealthy, and therefore the popular memory in 2005 situates them as “urban.” While there were indeed urban demonstrations, particularly in Detroit, Washington, and Baltimore, the participation of the suburbs is conspicuously left out of this picture.

In his comparison of French and American marginalization, Wacquant (2008) identifies four ways in which the situations in both countries are similar: 1) high concentrations of visible minority populations; 2) significant urban depopulation over the last few decades; 3) large percentages of young people; and 4) harsh stigma attached to such communities. He presents the issue of geographical placement, however, as a major difference: France’s marginalized population, like many European cities, rests on the outskirts of its urban centres, while America’s problem remains predominantly inside according to Wacquant (see also Boyer, 2000; Cross, 1992). While I am not contesting the existence of inner-city problems in America, particularly in Chicago’s South Side, which Wacquant vividly evokes, I do question the presumed structural differences that overlook marginalization in the American suburbs in the twenty-first century. This change in America is most evident when looking back to Burgess’s (1925/1984) diagram of the city from the 1920s (Fig. 5.2). In “The Growth of the City,” Burgess presents his influential concentric circle model, arguing that the further out from the downtown core one ventures, the safer and more homogeneous are the environs. Decades after Burgess’s study, however, Hagerdorn (2007) points out that “land values in Chicago’s interstitial slum areas have skyrocketed, and poor black and Latino residents have been evicted,

pushed out to what used to be the zone of workers' residences and into the suburbs" (p. 19). Evidently, gentrification in American cities like Chicago is significantly changing the urban landscape, making differences between the French *cités* and American suburbs less pronounced. Wacquant (2008) concludes his comparison by citing Wittgenstein's caution to "beware of the power that language has to make everything look the same" (cited in Wacquant, 2008, p. 162). As one sees in these examples, the word "suburb"—even more so "suburbia"—masks its many variants; it evokes a single, universal image within popular memory. Escaping this stranglehold of meaning remains a significant challenge.

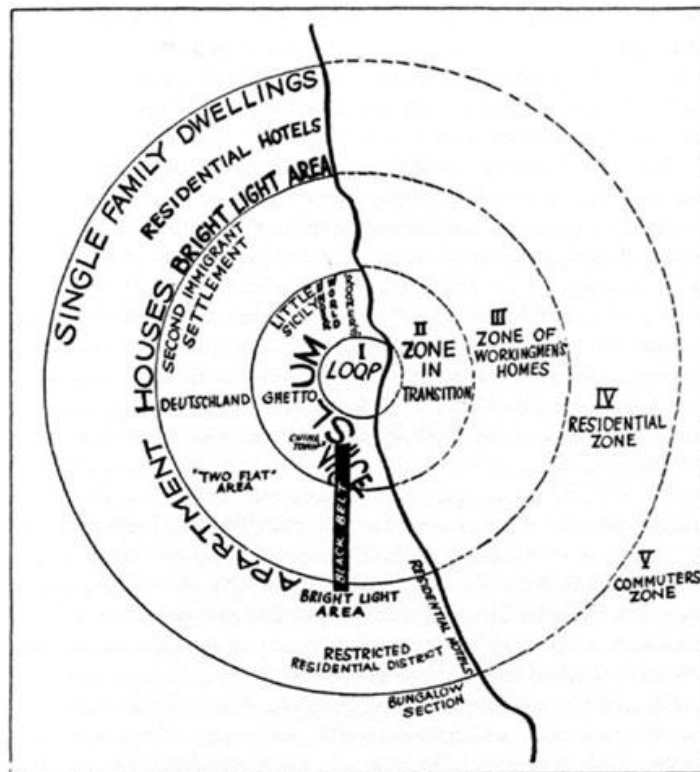


Figure 5.2: Burgess's (1925/1984) concentric circle diagram demonstrates that gangs resided in inner-city "slums" in the 1920s, while residential suburbs comprised mainly safe family neighbourhoods.

A Lack of Words: The Canadian Context

When Doug Saunders began covering international news for *The Globe and Mail*, he found himself travelling to “the northern reaches of Mumbai, the dusty edges of Tehran [...] the smoldering apartment-block fringes of Paris and Amsterdam and Los Angeles” (Saunders, 2010, p. 2). He realized that what he witnessed in the urban centres of these cities was only a small fraction of what was happening politically. Pockets of workers, recent immigrants, and marginalized populations were literally changing the composition of these cities by establishing huge communities on the outskirts. “These transitional spaces—arrival cities—are the places where the next great economic and cultural boom will be born, or where the next great explosion of violence will occur” argues Saunders (p. 3). One of the challenges Saunders faced in writing about these spaces was establishing a way of speaking about what he saw; the language simply did not exist.

While not all of the cities Saunders profiles are suburban-*propre*, the chapter titles reveal how prominent the suburbs are in such work: “On the edge of the city;” “Outside in;” “The urbanization of the village;” “When the margins explode.” It seems no words adequately capture what has been happening in the suburbs since the 1960s. Instead, authors like Saunders must gesture toward such spaces and attempt to draw them into some kind of semantic congruence. Elsewhere, Wacquant (2008) uses the term “urban outcasts” in his comparison of Chicago’s inner city to the French *banlieues*. Davis (1990/2006) argues that the old suburban belts of Los Angeles have become “outer cities” (p. 130). Other terms that vaguely approach the idea are ghetto, *degradati*,

problemomrade, favela, villa miseria, etc.⁷ Ultimately, a language does not yet exist to effectively describe these spaces and cultural producers continue to evoke their sense of confusion when writing about such geographical formations and social collectives.

Searching for similes, Canadian journalists have described Toronto's Jane-Finch neighbourhood on the northern edge of the city as "a scene in one of the ravaged sections of New York" (Moon, 1979, p. 4), "a scene from *West Side Story*" (Heller & Teshler, 1979, p. A1), and "an American-style ghetto" (cited in Richardson, 2007, p. 68). But these observations inevitably come with a qualification: respectively, the descriptions continue by arguing "But it isn't" (Moon, 1979, p. 4); "This isn't Spanish Harlem" (Heller & Teshler, 1979, p. A1); "But then you get there and see it's nothing like that" (cited in Richardson, 2007, p. 68). This recurring disavowal, evoking American inner cities (real or imagined) and then arguing that the description does not quite fit, speaks to the problem of representing a suburb in a way that does not accord with the American—or Canadian—dream of safe, prosperous, bedroom communities, revealing just how dominant the one way of seeing the suburbs remains.

In a *Toronto Life* article that wrestles with this question of suburbia lost for six pages, Gillmor (2007) repeats a common observation among Torontonians about a suburb in the east end:

Scarborough remains a symbol of a certain kind of alienation. When it was a homogenous suburb in the 1960s and '70s, it symbolized drab conformity, a largely white unhipness that was sneered at. Now it's

⁷ Wacquant (2008) discusses these terms at the outset of his study (See also Richardson & Skott-Myhre's (2012) introduction to *Habitus of the Hood*).

diverse and a symbol of a different kind of alienation, one that carries a hint of menace rather than complacency. (pp. 87-88)

Gillmor points out that Scarborough was guided by a former Baptist minister-turned-politician in the 1950s whose vision of an idyllic, middle-class suburb changed drastically with the immigration trends, social isolation, and economic marginality that led many visible minorities to “tribalism” (p. 90), and sparked gang formation among the youth. Furthermore, Gillmor claims that such suburbs “have the ingredients to become the ghettos of the future” (p. 92). This vision is what allows Gillmor to explain the question he sets out to answer: “how did boring, white-bread Scarberia [...] become Scarlem—a mess of street gangs, firebombings and stabbings?” (p. 86). Yet, historically, these issues are neither new nor unique to Scarborough—despite the fact that every few years the news media seem to “discover” the problem.

AVERAGE INDIVIDUAL INCOME, CITY OF TORONTO, RELATIVE TO THE TORONTO CMA, 1970-2005

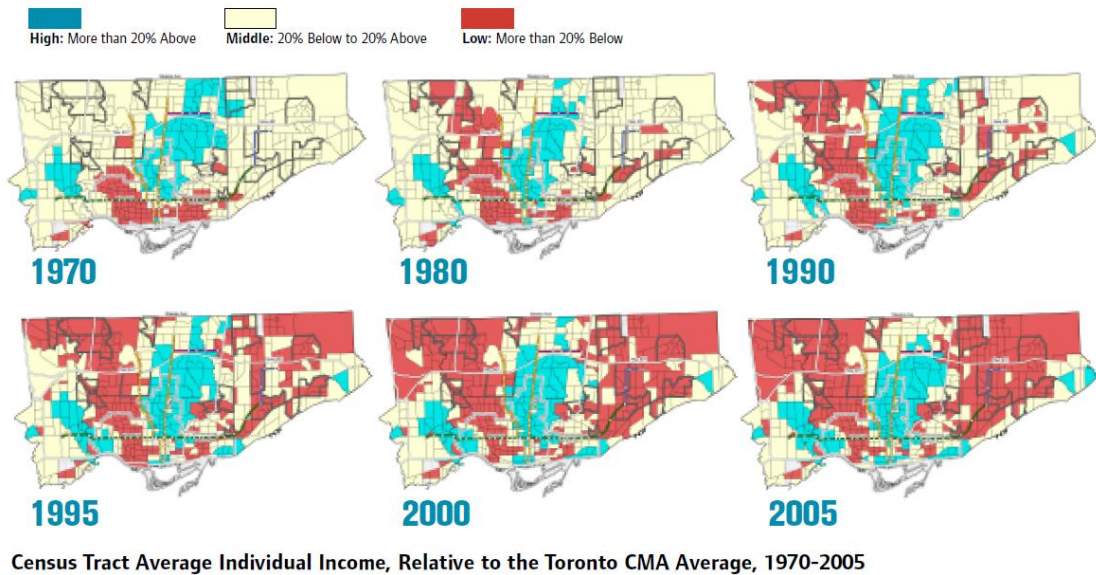


Figure 5.3: Many Canadian newspapers published maps similar to this one from Hulchanski’s (2007) report “The Three Cities within Toronto: Income Polarization Among Toronto’s Neighbourhoods, 1970-2005.”

In 2009, *The Toronto Star* announced that the city’s “middle class is disappearing” and “hardest hit are the suburbs” (Winsa, 2009, p. A9). Maps published alongside the article highlighted these claims (Fig. 5.3). This trend, however, dates back to the 1970s. Almost two years later, *The Globe and Mail* published a front-page story based on the same information—updated slightly—in which the journalist writes that “suburbs outside of Toronto are seeing a dramatic drop in the proportion of middle-income earners” (Paperny, 2010, p. A1).⁸ This amnesiac repetition of information that has been around for decades leads me to ponder a number of questions: Why is it surprising in the twenty-first century that suburbs exist in which ethnic minorities, youth gangs, and

⁸ These articles are based on Hulchanski’s (2007) report “The Three Cities within Toronto: Income Polarization Among Toronto’s Neighbourhoods, 1970-2005.”

poverty are prevalent? Why have these dystopian images been glazed over and replaced by homogenous reiterations of the 1950s? How does this suburban decline remain a prediction in 2010 despite the news, for half a century, that certain suburbs have fallen into disrepair?

Conclusion: Reimagining the present

Suburban communities underwent significant changes in the last half-century. The image of suburbia in popular memory, however, remains that of homogeneous, middle-class enclaves reminiscent of the 1950s. The dominant North American discourses through which scholars, journalists, and media professionals represent the subject reveal just how stubborn this image remains. When examples of problem areas have arisen in Los Angeles, Toronto, and abroad, journalists use them as antithetic examples against which they reinforce the popular memory of suburbia. At most, these spaces become examples of what the future of North American suburbs may look like without intervention. No one, however, seems willing to admit that substantial pockets of suburbia have already collapsed. Instead, symbolic violence erases the suburbs that do not fit the ideal.

The suburbs continue to be a space to which politicians pander and critics direct their condemnations of banality, sanitization, and conformity. The suburbs that do not live up to these definitions remain neglected and symbolically erased by a discourse without words or images to describe them. Until critical thinkers and cultural producers begin to meaningfully question the image of suburbia in popular memory, it seems the unofficial definition will remain that of affluent, white, middle-class families on the edges of town—despite proliferating examples to the contrary.

Challenging popular memory will not be a matter of replacing it with empirical evidence. As Spigel (2001) argues, “We need to stop thinking that television or movies or comic books are simply wrong or ‘ideological’ and that professional/official history is in some way a scientific antidote to such trivial misconceptions” (p. 376). The relationship between these knowledges, she argues, is something to which scholars must pay attention. “To what extent is our ‘professional’ historical text informed by these popular narratives? How does our desire for progress and our nostalgia for the past help to shape the historical narratives that we write?” (ibid.). Spigel concludes these queries by suggesting that a dialectical questioning of the two epistemological fields may reveal the blind spots within each. It is precisely within these spaces, just off to the side of dominant discourses, that scholars, artists, and public intellectuals can seek new frames of reference.

As the cases of Los Angeles, Paris, and Toronto highlight, those communities that are neither “inner cities” nor idyllic suburbs have fallen through the cracks of dominant journalistic discourses. In order to direct more attention toward these suburbs, a new language must be formed that escapes simplicity, binary opposition, and ready-made phrases. Bourdieu (1999) writes:

it should become clear that the so-called ‘difficult’ spots (housing projects or schools today) are, first of all *difficult to describe and think about*, and that simplistic and one-sided images (notably those found in the press) must be replaced by a complex and multilayered representation capable of articulating the same realities but in terms that are different and, sometimes irreconcilable. (p. 3, emphasis in original)

By pluralizing suburbia—without simply replacing the singular noun for a word that ends in “s”—critical readers and scholars may be able to question the motivations and expose the beneficiaries of this symbolic violence occurring just outside the city. The story that many North Americans keep telling themselves, that the suburbs are *not* ethnically diverse, financially precarious, or victims of crime and violence, needs to be rewritten. It is no longer valid to predict a dystopian future in suburbia when many residents are living it.

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6. “On Devrait Tout Détruire”: Contesting Symbolic Violence in Marginalized Communities¹

In this chapter, I explore two artistic interventions into the discourses of marginalized communities, moving from Clichy-sous-Bois in France to the neighbourhood of Regent Park in Toronto. Examining how these photographic projects destabilize the dominant imagery of the spaces as ganglands, I discuss ways for communities to open dialogues among journalists, residents, and the broader public. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and symbolic violence, as well as Nicolas Bourriaud’s concept of relational aesthetics, I investigate the cultural and political implications of such interactive strategies and highlight how they oblige journalists to rethink their depictions of stigmatized neighbourhoods to foster a more nuanced conversation about government policies and public perceptions. Turning also to Ariella Azoulay’s notion of the civil contract of photography, I consider the way photographs of marginalized citizens compel newspaper readers to watch—not passively look at—such images in order to observe the transformations they are capable of initiating.

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The possibility of *relational art* (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural, and political goals introduced by modern art. (Bourriaud, 1998, p. 14)

Introduction

His eyes stare menacingly at you. In the black and white photograph, the dark flesh of the subject's face and arms contrast the loose white T-shirt that hangs off his shoulders. He holds the viewfinder of the camera below his right eye, adjusting the focus with his left thumb and index finger. Behind the young man, half a dozen adolescents watch you carefully, cocking their heads back and raising their hands in gang-like gestures. In the background, a crumbling wall covered with graffiti and decay stands out of focus (Figure 6.1). The location could be anywhere—Brazil, Eastern Europe, North America, Saharan Africa. While the young men wear Western-style clothing, they appear to be of North-African descent.



Figure 6.1: *Ladj Braquage*. Photograph by JR (2006).

This scene evokes virtually all of the catchwords that denote marginalized communities in the media today: *banlieue*, *degradati*, *favela*, ghetto, inner-city, project, shantytown, or simply ‘the wrong side of the tracks.’ Not only do these phrases permeate newspapers and television broadcasts, social theorists are also establishing a language to describe such spaces and their inhabitants: Bauman’s (2004) outcasts; Davis’s (2006) slums, Richardson and Skott-Myhre’s (2011) hood, Wacquant’s (2008) hyperghetto, Young’s (1995) third world in the first. As Hagedorn (2007) suggests, within these spaces—whatever one calls them—“the institutionalization of gangs and other organizations of the socially excluded appears to be characteristic” (p. 27). Consequently, he suggests that “‘space’ and ‘race’ might be good twenty-first-century starting points” from which theorists consider such groups and their contemporary representations (ibid.).

Clearly, racialized and spatialized aspects of identity are central to understanding marginalized citizens and the communities they inhabit; however, moving beyond these theorizations to truly understand the way lived experiences structure subjectivities and their mediated relations remains challenging.

In this chapter, I explore two artistic interventions into the discourses of citizenship in marginalized communities, moving from Clichy-sous-Bois in France to Regent Park in Toronto. I examine how such mediations can open dialogues among journalists, residents, and their broader publics by destabilizing the dominant tropes and drawing attention to how spatial narratives are negotiated through embodied knowledges and lived experiences. I argue that these interventions represent part of a larger tradition of relational aesthetics, which Bourriaud (1998) suggests is art as “a state of encounter” (p. 18). While this concept is well established and prominently debated within the artistic field (see Bishop, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Bourriaud, 1998; Doherty, 2009; Kwon, 2004), it remains underserved within journalism and media studies. Part of my aim in this chapter is to nurture a conversation about how visual art, photography, and community activism can be understood and situated within this framework while analysing the implications specifically in relation to journalists and residents.

Returning to the image from Clichy-sous-Bois (Figure 6.1), I argue that through its deployment of common tropes—the graffiti, the threatening black male, the gestures of the boys—the photograph draws attention to the artificial nature of such markers of race and space. By taking symbols that many news sources align with gang discourses and replacing them with something else (shooting the viewer with a camera rather than a gun), the photographer forces spectators to begin again, to re-situate the image within a

paradigm that allows for such twists of convention and subversions of stereotypes.

Building on Deleuze and Guattari's (1994) definition of the work of art as "a compound of precepts and affects" (p. 164), Bourriaud (1998) suggests that artwork "acquires the status of an ensemble of units to be re-activated by the beholder-manipulator" (p. 20).

This photograph's ability to stir a strong emotional response, which changes as the viewer discovers what the subject holds, is quite powerful. As Ahmed (2010) writes in her examination of happiness, "it has always interested me that when we become conscious of feeling happy (when the feeling becomes an object of thought), happiness can often recede or become anxious" (p. 33). This image, I argue, demonstrates how the reverse can also be true. When one becomes conscious of feeling anxiety while regarding this photo, the anxiety tends to become something else. This 'something else' is an important part of the work itself.

The photograph appears in a publication entitled *28 millimètres: Portrait d'une génération* (2006), realised by Ladj Ly and a photographer who goes by the pseudonym JR. The image of Ladj, 26, which has been deemed *Ladj Braquage* (Stick-up Ladj) by the company that sells it, has stayed with me since I first saw it while flipping through a French photography magazine in 2006. For me, it not only evokes the conditions of recent North African immigrants living in the Parisian suburb where the photograph was captured, but also rouses the relationship between mainstream media and residents of low-income communities around the world. These residents frequently suffer a double victimization in the contemporary practices of global economics: first, through cultural and financial forces that necessitate leaving one's home in the "third world" only to arrive in low-income diasporas in the first; second, through the process by which

residents of these spaces assume distinct subjectivities by seeing themselves represented in the mainstream news media as lesser, inferior, and stigmatized citizens. Whether one agrees with these representations or not, their existence informs the identity of residents and affects how they negotiate daily interactions with others.

Unlike many images of undocumented workers, criminal gangs, or other deviant groups whom law enforcement officials, politicians, and moral entrepreneurs often adopt as their *causes célèbres*, the mainstream print and broadcast media rarely publish JR's photographs, relegating his work to more obscure art and lifestyle magazines. Perhaps this absence stems from the photographer's true identity being unknown. Perhaps it is because he illegally posters his work onto the sides of buildings, which authorities usually sandblast off. Or perhaps journalists simply have not been watching closely enough. Only recently, with his receipt of the 2011 Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) Prize of \$100,000, has JR gained some recognition in the mainstream news media. But what his photographs—and similar works in Canada—reveal about the relationship between journalists and residents of low-income communities is much more profound than is usually given credit.

By contrasting the work of JR to an art project in Toronto's Regent Park by Dan Bergeron, this chapter investigates the cultural and political implications of these interactive strategies and how they can oblige journalists to rethink their depictions of stigmatized neighbourhoods and help foster a more nuanced conversation about public perceptions. Examining these representations through Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and symbolic violence allows me to move beyond the confines of mind/body and structure/agency dualisms to articulate the full extent of internal and external factors that

affect how journalists depict these communities and others like them. Turning also to Ariella Azoulay's (2008) notion of the civil contract of photography, I consider the way photographs of citizens compel newspaper readers to watch—not just look at—such images in order to observe the transformations they are capable of initiating. I conclude by interrogating the possibilities for future endeavours based on strategies present in these works.

The Banlieues

In the fall of 2005, a series of riots left the French suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois stigmatized. Images of youths setting fires and hurling stones were virtually the only representations of the community appearing in local and international news coverage, further demonizing an already vulnerable population of unemployed and underemployed families, many with origins in former French colonies such as Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. While the manifestations stemmed from the deaths of Bouna Traoré, 15, and Zyed Benna, 17, who were electrocuted when hiding from police in a substation, the events also spoke to larger tensions among the residents of these neighbourhoods where racism, unemployment, and segregation have lingered for decades.² As Lapeyronnie (2009) writes, “riots forced the French public to acknowledge, at least for a time, the presence of the *banlieues*, to which they had been largely indifferent” (p. 21). Others compared the events to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, where neglected populations suddenly became visible after tragic events, forcing dominant groups within their

² In some areas, unemployment rates among young people continue to veer close to 40% (Tschimanga, Gondola, & Bloom 2009).

societies to acknowledge what they had already known for quite some time—that certain citizens were outside the concerns of the state (Cassen, 2005). Within days of the original riots, marginalized neighbourhoods across France joined in violent demonstrations. In the end, the country endured more than 200 police casualties, 10,000 burnt cars, and 5,200 arrests (Tschimanga, Gondola, & Bloom, 2009).

This incident became enmeshed within a complex set of social, spatial, and historical narratives. Historically, Mbembe (2009) argues, “the images of hundreds of armed white police officers pursuing or arresting young ‘people of color’ in urban neighbourhoods of the twenty-first century cannot fail to recall what happened in the ghettos of the northern United States, and especially in the American South, more than forty years ago” (p. 53). These events were not the first within the *banlieues* to generate significant attention that focused on the large populations of low-income, visible minority groups who challenged the taken-for-granted narratives of citizenship and nationhood.³ However, with the ubiquity of twenty-four-hour news sources, the 2005 riots were perhaps the most highly mediated of any other comparable event.

With this spectacle, and on the cusp of French national elections, certain groups of artists and concerned citizens found it an opportune time to challenge long-standing negative images. Notably, a young graffiti artist-turned-photographer going by the name

³ Riots and demonstrations have occurred sporadically in the *banlieues* since their modern formations after the Second World War, and have continued into the twenty-first century with increasing regularity (Tschimanga, Gondola & Bloom, 2009). In fact, long before the 2005 riots, Bourdieu (1998) argued that social and economic policies must be understood through their long-term effects:

Who would link a riot in a suburb of Lyon to a political decision of 1970?...You cannot cheat with the *law of the conservation of violence*: all violence is paid for, and for example, the structural violence exerted by the financial markets, in the form of layoffs, loss of security, etc., is matched sooner or later in the form of suicides, crime and delinquency, drug addiction, alcoholism, a whole host of minor and major everyday acts of violence. (pp. 39-40)

JR gained attention for posting large-scale photographs of residents on the walls of buildings. Unlike the dominant news photos, these images depicted residents holding cameras instead of weapons (Figure 6.1), laughing with one another, and mocking monstrous stereotypes by making funny faces (Figure 6.2). With this guerrilla-style exhibition, the artist challenged the mythology of Clichy-sous-Bois and other *banlieues* as menacing and hostile spaces.⁴ Using a 28-millimetre lens, JR shot hundreds of images throughout the neighbourhood, coming so close to his subjects' faces that the camera virtually grazed their noses. He shared some of this intimacy with the public by publishing his subjects' names, ages, and birth places (which were mainly in France) along with their photographs.



Figure 6.2: One of the few works by JR featured in the mainstream press. Notably, The New York Times does not mention JR at all in this story about the riot's anniversary, but features his photos on the cover.

⁴ Another notable artistic project was the city-sanctioned *Clichy sans cliché*, which deployed 12 professional photographers to explore the community and exhibit their findings publicly. But, with state approval, these displays seemed to lack the subversive elements of JR's work.

Posting these portraits around the city, JR presented an individuality that ran in stark contrast to the sensational group shots that mainstream news media transmitted during the riots. With the participants' consent, he added this personal information without attempting to contextualize it or situate the subjects' statements within a specific narrative or discursive frame. Instead, he left it up to individual viewers to form conclusions about the project and its participants. Furthermore, one of the first places JR posted the large-format photographs was in districts of Paris that were once low-income but had since become inhabited by *les bobos* [bourgeois bohemians] (JR & Ly, 2006). By confronting these residents, who normally have no direct contact with Clichy-sous-Bois, JR brought attention to the issues, and Parisians literally came face to face with these demonized subjects as they walked or drove through town.⁵ As the photographs made abundantly clear, these young people lived, breathed, smiled, and laughed, just like any other person in France. Despite their lack of economic opportunity, and, for some, the judgements that accompanied their skin pigmentations, one would be hard-pressed to find major differences among those viewing the images and those staring back at them from the sides of buildings. If nothing else, it became more difficult to dismiss them as gangsters, hoodlums, or hooligans.

Bourdieu's (1972/2007) concepts of habitus and symbolic violence are valuable tools in understanding this artistic intervention. As I have argued in previous chapters, habitus allows scholars to bypass the narrow-minded conceptions of social relations that

⁵ Although it is beyond this scope of this chapter, it would be interesting to use the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1991) to examine the faces in these works, which Levinas refers to as "an irreducible relation" (p. 79). Also helpful is Smith Fullerton and Patterson's (2006, 2008) work on mainstream news media in which they argue for expanding discourses to include ethics of care and responsibility through Levinasian frameworks.

focus solely on structural barriers while also avoiding a naïve belief that one must simply modify internal mindsets to solve social problems. Instead, habitus enables researchers to take into account both the external structural factors that affect persons and communities as well as the private life choices and preferences that individuals use to navigate their surroundings. In other words, habitus draws attention to the dialectical relationship through which structures are imposed and choices are made without assuming either single-minded automation or infinite possibilities.

As O'Sullivan (2001) argues, viewers often approach an object—or an image—only to find what one has seen before. He argues that what is “at stake with art, then, might be an altering, a switching, of this register” (p. 127), and he suggests that art’s “chief *modus operandi*” is to transform “if only for a moment, our sense of our ‘selves’ and our notion of the world” (p. 128). I submit that JR did just this with his art by capturing the attention of citizens and asking them to become more self-reflexive about their relationship to other residents. The art project required journalists in particular to report on discourses that low-income residents were putting forward through participating in these images rather than allow journalists to choose discourses for them out of ready-made categorizations. It asked audiences to question their own assumptions about newsworthiness and thus become more self-reflexive about the habitus guiding the attitudes and behaviours of readers and residents. For example, one cannot help but feel for the mayor of Clichy-sous-Bois when Sciolino and Bernard (2006) cover his attempts to organize an art show one year after the riots.

Mr. Dilain, the mayor, had high hopes for the opening to send a message and invited many French officials, including Mr. Chirac. A message was

sent, but not the one he had hoped. Not one official showed up. “It is symptomatic of the absence of interest in us,” he said. “I’m ashamed for France.” (Sciolino & Bernard, 2006, p. A8)

The affective side of portraits such as this one in *The New York Times* opens a deeper connection to the situation as journalists examine such absences and disappointments in addition to focussing on violence and other traditionally newsworthy events. As Gregg and Seigworth (2010) argue, exploring affective forces can become “incitements to *more than* discourse...to touch, to move, to mobilize readers” (p. 24, emphasis in original). In addition to the political possibilities, following this framework may also lead journalists to create more compelling articles and nuanced reports. I believe taking artists like JR seriously will allow journalists to become better reporters by thinking more expansively about the citizens they cover and the conversations they foster.

In positioning his work within the city in a way that could hardly be ignored, JR confronted the symbolic violence that divides citizens—or, more accurately, the perceptions of such groups—into simplistic, unquestioned binaries of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ With the *28 millimètres* project, JR explains that he helped transform each resident “from someone in the media whom you can’t recognize to someone whose door you can go and knock at, because on the photo there’s his name, his age, and even his building number” (TED, 2011). This suggestion does not presuppose that changing people’s perceptions will alleviate social sufferings or tear down restrictive economic and cultural barriers; however, by drawing attention to acts of representation, JR sheds light on the symbolic violence through which mediated discourses construct certain social and geographic spaces as hopeless ganglands. As Bourdieu (1990) argues, “sociology has to include a

sociology of the perception of the social world, that is, a sociology of the construction of the world-views which themselves contribute to the construction of this world” (p. 130). Media representations are an important terrain on which individuals exercise and resist symbolic violence. These seemingly inconsequential categorizations allow those with the most symbolic capital, those who possess the ability to name things, to perpetuate common-sense understandings of these spaces through such narrow constructions.

Regent Park

In Canada, residents on the margins of Toronto, Vancouver, and other large cities have fought similar forms of stigmatization as they have sought acceptance within broader social networks while attempting to retain elements of their cultural heritages. The mainstream news media often represent these neighbourhoods, like those marginalized spaces in Europe, as social problems existing precariously just outside the economic centres of their respective cities. Toronto’s Regent Park is no exception. One of Canada’s oldest and largest community housing projects, the 28-hectare (69-acre) site east of the city’s downtown core has been called a “colossal flop” (Allen, 1968), a “hopeless slum” (Gerard, 1975), and “a decaying enclave of urban poverty” (Mays, 2005a).⁶ Consequently, residents face great challenges in overcoming the prejudices and discrimination that such descriptors perpetuate.

More recently, this community has undergone significant changes as workers demolish buildings and construct new ones following plans for a 15-year-long, \$1-billion

⁶ For more detailed descriptions of the community and its history, see James (2010), Purdy (2003, 2005), Rose (1958), and Zapparoli (1999).

redevelopment that is tearing down 2,500 low-income units and replacing them with 5,100 new ones (only 1,779 of which will be for low-income residents) (Mays, 2005b). Planners hope that a more diverse distribution of high- and low-income residents will build self-esteem among poorer families and alleviate some of the issues the community faces relating to crime, gangs, and social stigma. Yet newspaper headlines continue to raise concerns with questions such as: “A new breed of resident is moving into Regent Park...but how committed to the community are they?” (McLean, 2009, p. M1), and “Bulldozed buildings, fatal shootings, uprooted residents: Is Regent Park revitalization crumbling?” (Paperny, 2010, p. A1). While many scholars and urban planners have voiced passion and/or scepticism toward the “revitalization” project, little disagreement exists that the area’s long and infamous history presents a substantial challenge to its future.

In 2008, members of the community staged an art project to raise awareness about the images that many residents’ felt were inconsistent with their daily experiences within Regent Park. Deploying a similar strategy of participatory art as seen two years earlier in Clichy-sous-Bois, organizers posted large murals of community members of diverse ages, cultures, and religious backgrounds on the sides of buildings in the area (Figures 6.3-6.6). As part of Toronto’s week-long *Luminato Arts Festival*, photographer Dan Bergeron and participants from *Regent Park Youth Arts Media Centre* and *Pathways to Education* created engaging sights in the community. In juxtaposition to the sensational media reports of crime and violence that often overshadow this area, residents in Bergeron’s images appear surprisingly banal. They look like sisters, brothers, grandparents and neighbours rather than drug-dealing gangsters or welfare queens. The *Globe and Mail*

reported that “the poster art, murals and eventually giant photographic and video projections going up around a core section of Regent Park aren’t just about the low-income neighbourhood and the residents who live behind nondescript walls” (Dixon, 2008, p. M5). Rather, the project is about “enlarging the residents’ vivid stories for all to see” (ibid.).



Figure 6.3: Photo of Regent Park Art Project (2008).



Figure 6.4: Photo of Regent Park Art Project (2008).



Figure 6.5: Photo of Regent Park Art Project (2008).



Figure 6.6: Photo of Regent Park Art Project (2008).

During the festival, volunteers gave walking tours through their neighbourhood, allowing outsiders to venture through the changing community while speaking with those who knew it best. The positive coverage in the mainstream press demonstrates that journalists are capable of reporting on communities like Regent Park in constructive ways. The problem is that most journalists and their readers are trained to view murder and violence as more newsworthy subjects, making it difficult for reporters to write about deeper, more complex issues without the aid of recent stabbings or gang raids to spark the conversation. Journalism scholars have long noted that the stories circulating in major daily newspapers do not necessarily reflect the choices of individual journalists, but rather speak to the values of news organizations (Behr, 1982; Cohen & Young, 1981;

Fishman, 1980; Tuchman, 1978).⁷ Consequently, Bourdieu (1998) argues that “it is clearly not a question of fighting against the journalists, who are themselves subject to the constraints of job insecurity, with all of the effects of censorship it produces in all the professions of cultural production” (p. 58). Instead, by negotiating the unwritten rules that influence how these organizations conduct themselves, community activists stand to better influence how residents appear, and, perhaps more importantly, that they *do* appear within the mainstream new media. This engagement with journalists who can disseminate and help to direct public debates is a crucial pathway for establishing social connections and political coalitions for residents (Bourdieu, 1996; Carey, 2009; Gitlin, 2003; Nord, 2001).

Regent Park’s “monster art,” as *The Globe and Mail* called it (Dixon, 2008, p. M5), became the news peg that allowed journalists to discuss fundamental issues like media bias, residents’ lived experiences, and stigmatization within Toronto (Figure 6.7). Because the portraits were so large and engaging, they captured the attention of many Torontonians and the installations became news in their own rights (see Bradshaw, 2008; DeMara, 2008a, 2008b; Dixon, 2008; Farquharson, 2008; Tucker, 2008). Like the French images that came before, the photographs in Regent Park asked journalists to acknowledge the negative stereotypes that their own organizations had helped foster, triggering a more nuanced conversation about representations of the neighbourhood. As one student told *The Toronto Star*, “we’re trying to bring positive reinforcement...into this neighbourhood because it has such a bad reputation” (DeMara, 2008b, p. E3).

⁷ These values generally involve such things as celebrity, children, risk, and violence (Jewkes, 2011). In other words, if stories involve famous people, vulnerable youth, potential risk to others, or blood and guts, they are more likely to appear in the next edition.

Furthermore, the production manager for the installation Seema Jethalal was “careful to avoid labelling StreetScapes as ‘a traditional, helping at-risk youth stay off the street’ initiative, especially since the young participants unanimously assert that they see nothing wrong with Regent Park” (Tucker, 2008, p. TO14). Through statements such as these, journalists inevitably had to acknowledge the stereotypes and one-dimensional frames that have plagued Regent Park in the last few decades within the explanations of who and what these photographs depict. By asking Torontonians to participate in the process alongside residents, the distance between residents and outsiders, both physical and symbolic, closed considerably.

OFF THE WALL » LIVING SPACE

Reclaiming Regent Park with monster art

BY GUY DIXON

A woman, walking past a Regent Park housing project due for demolition, stopped at the sight of Fathima Fahmy standing two storeys tall. “Look at her eyes,” said the local woman, gazing approvingly at the giant poster of the 18-year-old in her head scarf.

The image is striking. The appliqué technique used for the poster is micro-thin, making it look and feel part of the brick wall itself — as if the poster is reclaiming the condemned wall.

Which is the whole idea. The poster art, murals and eventually giant photographic and video projections going up around a core section of Regent Park aren't just about the low-income neighbourhood and the residents who live behind nondescript walls. The exhibit, called *Living Space*, is also about enlarging the residents' vivid stories for all to see during Luminato.

And it's also about Luminato itself — only in its second year but with a massive budget, including \$15-million in recently granted funds from the province — trying to connect to the grassroots arts community.

A criticism typically surrounding Luminato, which the Regent Park project partially tries to address, is that rather than being an arts festival looking for funding, it can seem like

a mass of funds in search of a festival. It's like an infant with an adult's budget.

But Claire Hopkinson, executive director of the Toronto Arts Council, says, “Luminato, which has been given all of these resources as a way to showcase Toronto, is really trying to do all it can to represent the various different levels, the whole cultural ecology.” She adds that Luminato's “challenge is to establish the relationships.” And trust and relationships don't grow up overnight, she says. “I feel [Luminato] are doing as much as they possibly can right now, within a very short time frame, to include Toronto artists.”

Devon Ostrom, one of the Regent Park exhibit organizers, said that it would be cynical to talk about the art project in the same breath as budgets and provincial appropriations, as if Regent Park is only involved as a way to satisfy criticism.

The project is a result of proposals by Manifesto Community Projects, as well as close participation of the Regent Park Youth Arts Media Centre and the outreach program Pathways to Education. These groups proposed creating a workshop that pairs 17 Regent Park teens with seasoned artists to create art reflecting the neighbourhood.

This two-month workshop has become the heart and soul

of Luminato's StreetScape program of public exhibits, which also includes an installation at Sam Pollock Square in Brookfield Place downtown, offering interactive connections to other sites: a site at the base of Parliament Street featuring Canadian street artists painting on fake, mock-up houses, called *Housepaint*; and a site at the foot of Jarvis Street where painters will be decorating lakefront construction hoarding.

The Regent Park project is StreetScape's main base. The participants are simply kids from the neighbourhood, some with artistic aspirations, some not. Izzy Rashid, 18, does plan to study environmental design and graphic arts in art school. “So this is great,” he said, noting that he'll use his Luminato creations in his portfolio, including photographic work taken during a mentoring workshop with New York street photographer Jamel Shabazz.

Mr. Rashid's feelings about Regent Park come through in the installations. “I used to live in one of the bigger buildings over there. And I used to come to this building on Saturdays and Sundays,” he said, motioning to the one due for demolition that carries Ms. Fahmy's two-storey image.

The artwork won't be completely installed and unveiled until the last weekend of the



StreetScape's *Living Space*: Enlarging residents' vivid stories.

festival, June 13 to 15. That's when the workshop teens will conduct evening tours for three nights, from 600 Dundas St. E.

“Right where you walk in off Dundas, there will be that sense of light, the Luminato sense of something there,” said Robert Vanderberg, associate producer for the festival's visual-arts and public installations.

There will also be a large-scale, projected video piece by New York artist Oliver Herring, featuring improvised scenes of Regent Park and its residents. And on Saturday, June 14, Mr. Herring will hold a participatory TASK party at the nearby rink, where visitors will be invited to do “art tasks,” creating a party atmosphere. Mr. Herring wanted to incorporate Regent Park into the pieces.

As 18-year-old participant Adrita Sarwar says, “I didn't know at the time that it was going to be so much about Regent Park. So, I started understanding that it was a lot about the neighbourhood, and that it was being broken down [and demolished]. And so we are trying to leave with a bang.”

▀ Regent Park: June 13 to 15, 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. (projections begin at dusk).

▀ Jarvis St. and Parliament St. slips: June 13, 4 p.m. to midnight; June 14, noon to midnight; June 15, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.

▀ Sam Pollock Square, Brookfield Place: June 6 to 15, 24 hours.

Figure 6.7: Article from *The Globe and Mail* on Art Project in Regent Park (Dixon, 2008).

The project confronted the more pervasive, negative images that originate from police blotters and compelled journalists and their readers to discuss and question their own habitus, which had been operating unconsciously to this point. Thus, a crucial aspect within the project was to draw attention not only to the stories and politics underlying Regent Park, but also to highlight the very way these things are represented and engaged with on a daily basis.

The Politics of Visibility and Destruction

Reactions to the projects in Clichy-sous-Bois and Regent Park are diverse. Supporters call the images empowering. Critics view them as vandalism. Perhaps most interesting are the spectators who presume the subjects are deceased. As the *Torontoist* reported of Fathima Fahmy (Fig. 6.4), whose two-storey portrait was the first to appear on the side of a Regent Park building, “a few [people] have rather morbidly thought that she must be dead and that the wall must be a memorial to her” (Topping, 2008). These macabre assumptions speak to the understandings of place through which residents of these neighbourhoods operate. On one hand, it makes sense that tenants would adjust their expectations based on the history of the area; it is no secret that the life chances of young people, particularly young black men, in these neighbourhoods are not inspiring. As a teacher points out in the Regent Park documentary *Invisible City* (Davis, 2009), “you know you’re a product of the projects when you’ve been to more funerals than you’ve been to weddings.” Many individuals come to an understanding that only death will make them important enough to be photographed and represented in newspapers. Journalists perpetuate this belief by publishing articles on residents primarily after shootings,

homicides, and other violent events. On the other hand, perhaps something *is* eulogized within these projects—the depiction of residents as monsters or criminals. If these projects are successful, such negative images, what Azoulay (2008) calls “planted pictures,” will be destroyed and replaced by more compassionate reflections.

While Azoulay’s (2001) examination of death and photography in *Death’s Showcase: The Power of Image in Contemporary Democracy* is rich and complex, I argue her most powerful insight comes from *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008). In it, Azoulay (2008) contends that, much like Rousseau’s social contract, the “civil contract of photography” is a construct that may never have been formally consecrated but nevertheless “rests on the fact of its historical existence in every act of photography” (p. 26). According to Azoulay, photographic images represent concrete political relations among their actors (photographer, photographed, and viewer), which ultimately demand actions. Everyone involved, she argues, has a duty to abide by common rules of acceptable conduct, including the duty to protect others from harm. Consequently, she suggests that everyone who engages with photographs holds an obligation to share in the political issues the images communicate explicitly as well as implicitly. Azoulay (2008) posits that in producing photographs, individuals become linked in a dialogue that encompasses much more than what appears through the lens.

Even when it seems possible to name correctly in the form of a statement what it shows—“This is X”—it will always turn out that something else can be read in it, some other event can be reconstructed from it, some other player’s presence can be discerned through it, constructing the social relations that allowed its production. (Azoulay, 2008, p. 12)

To illustrate this concept, I return to the first photograph in Clichy-sous-Bois (Figure 6.1). In a clip from the film promotion for the *28 Millimetres* project, JR follows a number of people as they guide him through a neighbourhood of rundown apartment complexes and desolate (sub)urban motorways. Interspersed between photography sessions, a resident walks through the neighbourhood giving his impressions: “*Là, c’est vraiment le ghetto...Pas d’ascenseur, tout est cassé...pas de lumière. C’est inhumain de vivre là, de laisser les gens vivre ici. On devrait tout détruire.*” The translation provided in the film is: “This is the ghetto... No elevator, everything is broken...No light. It’s not human to leave here [*sic*]. You can’t leave people like this. We should rebuild everything.” After I presented a clip from this film at the University of Illinois in Chicago, a member of the audience approached me and pointed out that the translation the filmmakers provide is not as accurate as it could be: the resident in the film does not mention “rebuilding” anything. Rather, he says, “we should destroy everything” (*on devrait tout détruire*).⁸ And, as one sees in the video, this is just what happens to JR’s photographs as city workers sandblast them off brick by brick with high-pressure hoses.

The images of JR’s work being demolished, which his book also features prominently, hold significant resonance in France, where Nicolas Sarkozy vowed to clean out the *racaille* (riffraff or thugs) with the high pressure hose *le Kärcher* (de Montvalon, 2005; Sciolino, 2005). Concluding *28 Millimètres* (2006) by depicting the destruction of the photographs by city workers with such instruments is a conscious move by JR to

⁸ I would like to thank Nicolas Gortzounian, who was in the audience during my presentation and later pointed out this inconsistency in the translation. Also, I am grateful to the organizers in the Art History Program at The University of Illinois at Chicago who hosted the conference, where I was first able to try out some of these ideas before a group of engaged scholars and artists.

evoke these events and the questions they raise about citizenship and lived experience. Without dictating how the images are to be understood, JR provokes a conversation about the right to exist within a society that targets poor youth in an attempt to clean them out *au Kärcher* rather than clean up and fix their broken down apartments. In other words, he draws attention to what Azoulay would term the social contract of photography.



Figure 6.8: Screen capture from *28 millimètres* (2006).

As all of the theorists in this chapter highlight, critical spectatorship must involve challenging how words and images are constructed and acknowledging that other possibilities exist. As Bourdieu and Passeron (2000) explain, symbolic violence functions by imposing specific meanings while denying the possibility of other interpretations and “concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force” (p. 4). In this sense, when journalists, editors, and news organizations make choices in the framing, retelling, and visualization of events, but present them as the only possible choice (i.e., not a choice

at all), such impositions become symbolically violent. If representations of a neighbourhood situate it primarily within a criminal discourse, it contributes to the way outsiders view this space and interact within it, essentially stripping it of alternative ways of being (Richardson & Skott-Myhre, 2012). Regent Park and Clichy-sous-Bois are both historical examples of this type of symbolic violence. For this reason, argues Bourdieu (1990), “the categories of perception, the systems of classification, that is, essentially the words, the names which construct social reality as much as they express it, are the crucial stakes of political struggle” (p. 134).

Unlike artistic creations, news images are usually explicit in terms of the people and events they represent. But they too relay information about an expansive set of peripheral considerations that frame the photograph. The best way to begin answering some of the questions photographs raise, suggests Azoulay (2008), is to stop looking and start watching. Watching a photograph “entails dimensions of time and movement that need to be reinscribed in the interpretation of the still photographic image” (Azoulay, 2008, p. 14). As one watches JR’s photographs, for example, various questions arise: Why is it so easy to assume Ladj holds a gun? How do these photographs affect the way we feel about residents? What do these photographs want from us by appearing on the buildings and then in the press? These lines of thought come not from quickly looking at the photographs, as Azoulay suggests, but from watching them unfold in time. The image captures a fraction of a second, but the event of watching, of creating a dialogue with the photograph, takes considerably longer.

In a 2006 interview, JR recounts taking his photo of Ladj (Figure 6.1):

He was filming me pasting up some photos on the walls, when these local kids came up to me...they wanted to know what I was doing and wanted to be in the picture. I told the kids to move back a bit while my friend stepped closer to the camera. The final image became a kind of symbol of the positive power of the French ghettos. (van Gaalen, 2006, p. 50)

When JR returned a few days later and distributed the photo among residents, they invited him to take more pictures. The photographer did not erase himself from the final product; he met his subjects eye-to-eye and posted that relationship for all to see.

Similarly, Bergeron's subjects in Regent Park confront their viewers, asking spectators to become actively engaged rather than passively observed. As Azoulay (2008) argues, such initiatives exist within "a civil space in which photographers, photographed subjects, and spectators share a recognition that what they are witnessing is intolerable" (p. 18). She draws attention to the dimension of citizenship that involves people interacting with one another rather than simply serving higher powers and remaining "objective" or removed from the situation. The works that residents and artists are performing in these neighbourhoods poignantly evoke such committed relationships, which are integral aspects of living together and sharing in the conversation that journalists help foster.

Conclusion

Most citizens rarely, if ever, walk the paths of Regent Park or cross the thoroughfares of Clichy-sous-Bois. Consequently, they lack an embodied knowledge of these

neighbourhoods, making the images presented by mainstream news organizations powerful sources of information. If the stereotypes and negative tropes that circulate within the dominant news media are to continue being destroyed, new forms of expression must emerge to take their place. As Bourdieu (1996) argues, one challenge is that “the daily vision of the *banlieue*, in its monotony and greyness, says nothing to anyone and interests no one, least of all journalists” (p. 20, my translation).⁹ Fortunately, JR’s and Bergeron’s photographs provide vivid examples of how one can approach this daunting task of evoking the quotidian in realistic and provocative ways.

JR’s work outside of Paris and Bergeron’s efforts in Regent Park illustrate concrete possibilities for generating discussions that break away from taken-for-granted assumptions and restore a critical dimension to the discourses of citizenship and photography that are often missing within our twenty-four-hour-news cultures. Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and symbolic violence allow for deeper understandings as to why people expect to see certain things in newspapers, and how these beliefs shape the way individuals internalize and behave within their surroundings. Furthermore, studies on affect theory and relational aesthetics help to interrogate the forces that go beyond the level of words and images, incorporating novel ways of approaching the affective relationships viewers hold with such works of art. With Azoulay’s powerful argument for why citizens must engage photography and watch—not merely look at—still images, journalists, residents, and everyone engaged in the photographic act, can begin to more

⁹ He adds that “Even if they took an interest in what really happens in the *banlieues*, and really wanted to show it, it would be extremely difficult” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 20). Because Bourdieu’s discussion of the *banlieue* is completely erased from Ferguson’s translation, I have opted to give my own translation here. For more discussion on this topic (see Chapter Five).

effectively question these underlying associations and implicit understandings of certain criminalized groups.

The images in Clichy-sous-Bois may have been blasted off *au Kärcher*, and those in Regent Park have since been demolished to make way for new buildings; however, when they appeared, these photographs prevented residents from appearing only as street thugs or gang members. With the permanent public installation of “Faces of Regent Park” forthcoming in Toronto, and JR’s publication of *28 millimètres* and other books, the traces of these projects will remain, and the possibilities for subjects to construct new relationships with their audiences continue. The message I hope to instil in this final chapter is not that residents of marginalized spaces must render larger-than-life images of themselves on the sides of buildings to be acknowledged. Rather, the mainstream news media’s central role in circulating information about these communities must be confronted and challenged, or else its dominant vision may become misrecognized as the only available option. These art projects demonstrated that focusing too heavily on violent youths and the fires they set risks overlooking the more banal, everyday scenes of parents coming home from work, teachers helping students, and children playing together. Disseminating these images among a large public is challenging when guns and gangs sell more newspapers and attract more viewers. But it remains a challenge that, thankfully, artists like JR and Bergeron show they are not willing to concede.

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House.

7. Conclusion: Decentring Gangs

[Researchers] can help lucid and critical journalists (there are a lot of them, but not necessarily in the top jobs in television, radio and the press) by providing them with instruments of knowledge and understanding, perhaps sometimes of action, that would enable them to work with some effectiveness towards withstanding the economic and social forces that bear on them, particularly by allying with social science researchers, whom they often see as enemies. (Bourdieu, 1998a, p. 73)

The Gangscape as Habitus

In this chapter, I consider how such a protean term as “gangs” operates in contemporary English-speaking news media and I assess some of the implications of previous findings for public debates about crime. I begin by examining how researchers may hope to go beyond Bourdieu to expand upon his theories and rethink some of the problems I uncovered in this work. I conclude by posing three research questions that I think will be central to the next great debates regarding the mediation of crime in North America. But first, let us consider what it means to think of the gangscape as habitus.

In the last few decades, scholars have produced thousands of books and articles about gangs. There are the quintessential Chicago School republications: Thrasher’s (1927/2004) *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*, Shaw’s (1930/2004) *The Jack-Roller: A Delinquent Boy’s Own Story*, and Shaw, McKay, and McDonald’s (1938/2004) *Brothers in Crime*. There are the edited collections: Cummings and Monti’s (1993) *Gangs: The Origins and Impact of Contemporary Youth Gangs in the United*

States, Huff's (1990, 1996, 2002) *Gangs in America*; *Gangs in America* (2nd Ed), *Gangs in America III*, Hagedorn's (2007) *Gangs in the Global City: Alternatives to Traditional Criminology*. And then there are the outliers: Sanday's (2007) *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus*, Worthen's (2001) *The Gang: Coleridge, the Hutchinsons & the Wordsworths in 1802*, Weingarten's (2006) *The Gang that Wouldn't Write Straight: Wolfe, Thompson, Didion, Capote, and The New Journalism Revolution*, and Davis's (2009) *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street* (Fig. 7.1).

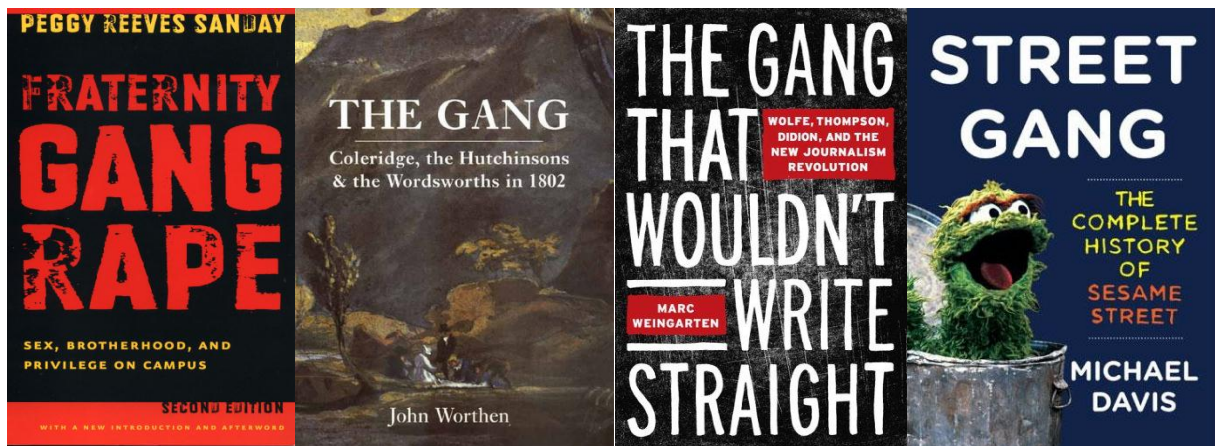


Figure 7.1: Recent books that employ the term “gang” include *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus* (Sanday, 2007); *The Gang: Coleridge, the Hutchinsons & the Wordsworths in 1802* (Worthen, 2001); *The Gang that Wouldn't Write Straight: Wolfe, Thompson, Didion, Capote, and The New Journalism Revolution* (Weingarten, 2006); and *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street* (Davis, 2009).

I would like to discuss the last books briefly, examining what they reveal about gang discourses today. The first book is about college fraternities—groups of young men who are unlikely to refer to themselves as “gang members,” and yet they are undoubtedly

capable of committing “gang rape.” The second is a study of early-nineteenth-century poets. Few readers are likely to confuse Coleridge and the Wordsworths for the Jamaican Shower Posse or the Hells Angels; however, I am sure readers are capable of understanding this “gang” in the context of the book. In a similar vein, the third book focuses on a group of writers—a white-suited, well-spoken cultural critic, a drug-guzzling master of eccentric prose, an anxiety-ridden, self-reflexive essayist, and a gay Manhattanite most famous for winning the trust of a cold-blooded murderer. These authors had little personal contact and yet they comprise a “gang” associated with New Journalism. The final book, which plays with the connotations of the word, documents the history of a gang of children’s puppets. These four texts seem to have nothing in common. Yet they all employ the word “gang.” And, arguably, they all make perfect sense to their authors, editors, and readers.

I have used many concepts in the preceding chapters to tackle these issues of language and representation in gang discourses, but the one to which I turn most frequently is Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. It is “that presence of the past in the present” (Bourdieu, 1997/2000, p. 210); that “embodiment of the immanent necessity of a field” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127); that “product of an individual history, but also, through the formative experiences of earliest infancy, of the whole collective history of family and class” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 91). Bourdieu describes habitus in many ways. I often tell my students: it is that thing inside each of us that tells us what to do and how to do it without even being aware of it. Habitus, I argue, allows readers of the four books mentioned above to understand their themes without consciously questioning the terminology. Like other readers, I will pick up the first book expecting to know more

about privileged young men who practice criminal sexual behaviours. I will read the second book for information about romantic poets, the third to acquire knowledge of New Journalism, and the fourth to better understand a children's television show. If left unchecked, however, habitus will also tell me that young black males are to be feared, that white women cannot be gang members, and that suburban gangs fit better within the punch-line of jokes than featured in most-wanted posters (see Fig. 7.7).

This issue of signification within gang discourses goes beyond that of equivocal terminology; "gang" is not merely a word with different meanings under different circumstances like "bank," which can refer to a break in a river or a financial institution. It also goes beyond mere ambiguity, such as calling someone "nice" without fully elaborating whether that means kind, charitable, physically attractive, or some other variation. Instead, "gang" can subtly vilify subjects, sitting on the edge of defamation but never crossing into it. The word can spread panic without ever referring to a specific group that people should fear. It can help implement policies that ban students from wearing certain colours, that send police into certain neighbourhoods, and that justify invasive surveillance techniques, all of which would likely face great resistance under different circumstances. And yet, despite its immense weight, even the most highly trained law enforcement officials cannot agree on what constitutes a gang, who belongs to a gang, and how gangs differ from other groups.

These unspoken understandings represent the power of that unconscious knowledge that Bourdieu terms habitus, and it relates to contemporary crime reporting in important ways. As Kennedy and I demonstrate in Chapter Two, the term "gang" appears frequently in Canadian newspapers. It refers to "anti-gang initiatives" (14%), "street

gangs” (12%), “drug gangs” (11%), “social groups” (11%), and a host of other collectives. Most frequently, journalists fail to provide the information necessary to judge what the gang does, who is in it, or why it is a “gang.” We posited that journalists rely on their own habitus to use the word in idiosyncratic ways that they nevertheless judge to be natural, obvious, and need no explanation. In this way, journalists refer to family members (Strachan, 2010), pirates (“Friday at a Glance,” 2010), roller-bladers (Johns, 2010), criminal biker gangs (Daw, 2010), even a group of scientists at The Canadian Institute for Theoretical Astrophysics (Brown, 2010). While such uses were diverse, the vast majority depicted criminal activities (87%), and even when journalists did not explicitly label groups as criminal, their depictions held negative connotations (Fig. 7.2).

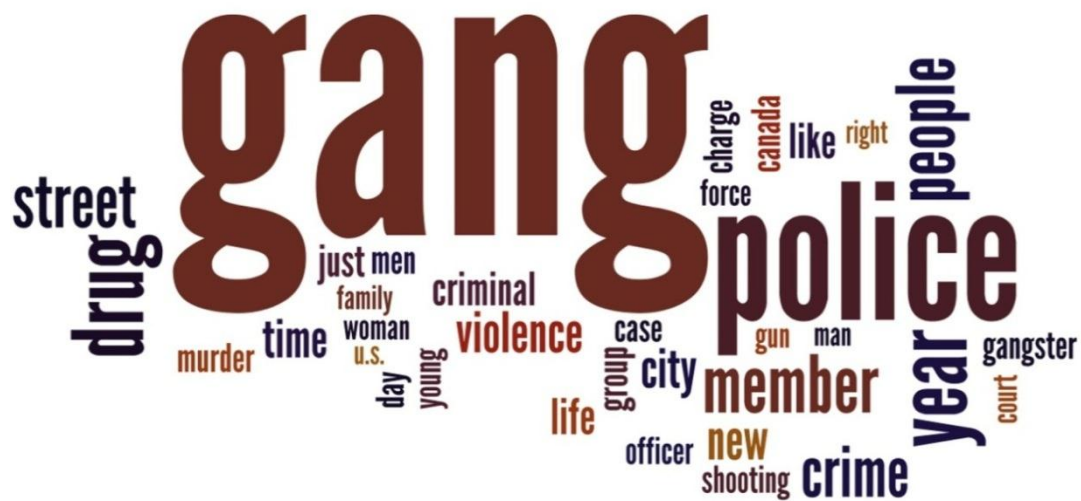


Figure 7.2: Word Cloud—All newspapers (2010).

In Chapter Three, I explored the class habitus of mainstream print journalists in Canada, specifically in relation to the *West Side Story* analogy that reporters continue to use. I demonstrated that, in contrast to the film, researchers suggest gang members are more loosely organized, more sexually and ethnically diverse, and more geographically dispersed than the characters of the play. In fact, gangs bear little-to-no resemblance to the cast of the award-winning musical. Nevertheless, journalists rely on their class habitus, assuming that readers will share their worldviews, and present *West Side Story* as an adequate stand-in for the gangs they cover. With the vast amount of peer-reviewed research available on gangs today, I argue that it is inexcusable for reporters' references to remain trapped in 1961. These schemes of perception must be reassessed by including more diverse groups in the conversations that journalists facilitate and by reassessing the seemingly natural associations crime reporters create through such allusions.



Figure 7.3: Curiously, journalists continue to compare real-life gangs to *West Side Story* (1961).

In Chapter Four, I used Bourdieu’s framework, along with that of Searle and Austin, to explore the power gang discourses hold in mediated political debates. I argued that Harper’s Conservatives used “gangs” rhetorically to distinguish the party from its political competitors. Thus, the Prime Minister often appeared in mainstream newspaper coverage to be a victim of bullying and group intimidation rather than an outvoted politician within a democratic debate. Blurring the line between criminal gang and political party, media discourses during the 2011 federal election uncritically employed the term “gang,” helping to shape the frames within which both journalists and politicians discussed events. While I do not assert that Harper and his associates used this strategy consciously, they clearly benefitted from the dominant schemes of perception within Canada’s mediated political landscape, demonstrating one of the ways habitus can intersect with criminal discourses in the country to influence political debate.



Figure 7.4: I argue that Prime Minister Stephen Harper, pictured here with his cat Cheddar, used gangs rhetorically to help his campaign in 2011.

In Chapter Five, I explored issues of space and place, investigating the symbolic violence that allows North American journalists to continue reporting on suburban gangs as a new and exceptional occurrence—despite gangs appearing in the suburbs for decades. As Bourdieu (1998) suggests, such a practice “favors a sort of amnesia” (p. 72). Thus, when suburban gangs appear in the news, journalists’ habitus leads them to represent such groups as new. Afterward, they seem to forget such stories existed, representing the next suburban gang as new once again. Without a conscious recognition of this problem, such discourses appear doomed to repeat themselves.

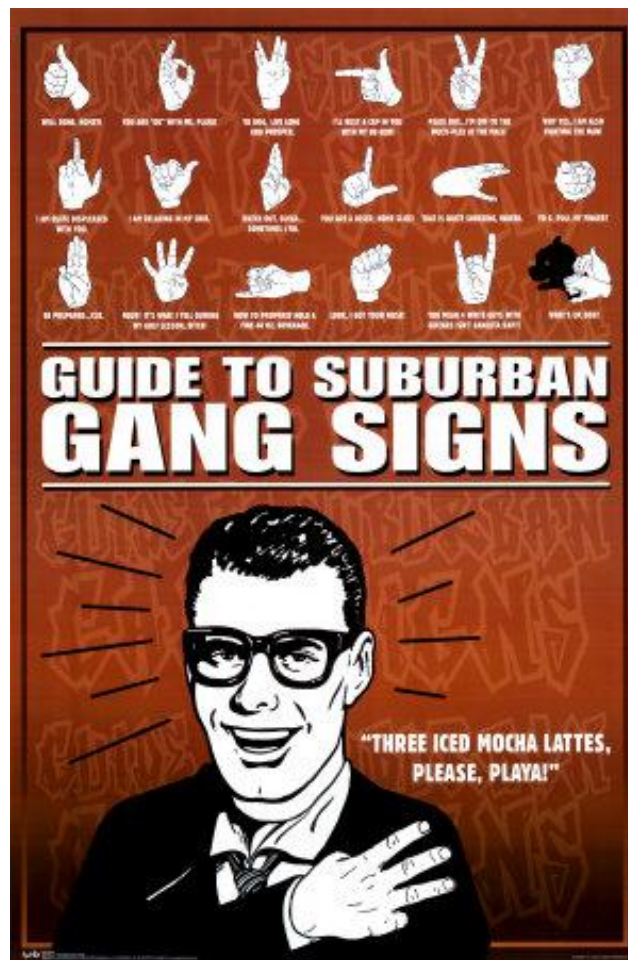


Figure 7.5: Popular posters, such as the one above, rely on a class habitus that situates gangs within the inner city and white, middle-class father figures in the suburbs.

Finally, in Chapter Six, I surveyed two artistic interventions into these discourses that break with taken-for-granted attitudes. JR's photographs of residents outside of Paris and Bergeron's portraits of residents from Regent Park became news in their own right, allowing many journalists to put a new spin on an old problem. Thus, representations of the poor and marginalized groups that tend only to appear in the news when crimes occur became symbolically empowered. These two projects provide examples of strategies activists and media producers can incorporate into their own toolkits to challenge citizens' habitus.



Figure 7.6: JR's work asked citizens to reconsider the dominant criminal tropes aligned with residents of marginalized suburbs.

In all chapters, I attempted to reveal the unspoken agreements between journalists, the seemingly natural relationships between gangs and their communities, and the symbolic violence that functions by imposing one specific reading of such issues by erasing alternatives. Rather than replace “lies” with “truth” or “bias” with “facts,” I have outlined the many perspectives that mainstream newspapers often fail to acknowledge, thereby demonstrating that these universal values are actually particular worldviews through which journalistic discourses impose dominant readings. Ultimately, I hope this study encourages readers to consider their own habitus, which is both unique and shared within communities.

The influence habitus exerts on journalism, framing public debates about gangs and crime in the country, providing the details that influence readers’ reactions, and perpetuating particular understandings of the world, cannot be underestimated. While much more research remains to be done, an important starting point, and a central theme in this work, is assessing one’s own position through what Bourdieu (2004/2007) calls “self-analysis” and seeking alternatives to the “natural” order of things. In the next section, I outline how such analysis can help researchers think with Bourdieu and potentially go beyond him to ask new and important questions.

Going Beyond Bourdieu

Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, among other concepts, provides a rigorous and powerful starting point from which criminologists, media scholars, and sociologists can explore questions of representation and communication in relation to gangs. But, as Bourdieu would no doubt point out, he does not think in a vacuum. For this reason, I have

introduced a “gang” of theoreticians that complement and/or augment Bourdieu’s intellectual offerings. Bourdieu engaged with some of these scholars—Austin, Searle, and Foucault—during his lifetime, toying with speech acts theory and responding to Foucauldian power-knowledge as he worked through his ideas. Others—Azoulay, Bourriaud, and Spigel—arrived too late to know how Bourdieu would have greeted them. In combining certain aspects of their work, I believe readers get a fuller, more robust perspective of the implications contemporary gang coverage holds.

Employing this matrix of scholars, however, is not like putting together a jig-saw puzzle: the pieces are not made to fit. The integrated-article format allowed me to probe the representations of gangs in the news media without limiting myself to one theory, one method, or one argument. But the nature of this format does not permit me to build a deep examination of the underpinnings of these studies. As I continue pursuing my research, I hope to further explore some of the issues I was unable to fully elaborate here. Such themes relate to the visual and literary rhetoric of crime news, the problems of interdisciplinary scholarship, and the study of popular memory. In the following section, I present considerations that will be central to such work.

Rhetoric and Representation

Bourdieu’s interrogation of rhetorical and literary devices was, for the most part, subsumed by his exploration of cultural capital and social space. For example, in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Bourdieu (1992/1996) posits:

to exist socially means to occupy a determined position in the social structure and to bear the marks of it, especially in the form of verbal

automatisms or mental mechanisms; it also means to depend on, to hold and to be held by, in short, *to belong to* groups and be enclosed in networks of relations which have objectivity, opacity and permanency, and which show themselves in the form of obligations, debts, duties—in short controls and constraints. (p. 27)

Thus, Bourdieu's concern with writing and representation primarily aims to unravel authors' positions in social space. This focus is an important one, but I find it pays too little attention to the words and images themselves. After all, Bourdieu does not contend that, for example, all white, middle-class men—those who comprise the majority of executive newsroom positions in Canada (Barber & Rauhala, 2005)—would write the same things or choose the same images. Members of these communities do indeed share similar characteristics, word choices, and preoccupations. But a consideration of how these similarities manifest themselves is always secondary for Bourdieu and he provides little material that might explain how researchers can assess the differences that exist among the actual words and images journalists choose to put on the page.

I turned to Azoulay and Bourriaud's notions of the social contract of photography and relational aesthetics in the previous chapter to help me examine images in the news media. But as I attempt to develop recommendations for improving representations in the press, I hope to elaborate how journalists and researchers can use Bourdieu's insights about symbolic power to demonstrate not only the makeup of the field in which journalists operate but also where opportunities exist for changing and improving content. As critical media scholars, I believe we must produce work that helps connect marginalized communities with the cultural workers who (re)present these spaces. I have

begun such work with *Habitus of the Hood* (Richardson & Skott-Myhre, 2012), and I hope to extend Bourdieu's themes through further interdisciplinary scholarship.

Interdisciplinarity

Bourdieu, perhaps more than any other scholar, demonstrated the necessity, as well as the challenge, of interdisciplinary research. While primarily a sociologist, he discussed art (Bourdieu, 1965/1990, 1966/1990, 1979/1984, 1992/1996), education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964/1979, 1970/2000; Bourdieu, 1984/1988, 1989/1996, 1997/2000), gender (Bourdieu, 1998/2001), language (Bourdieu, 1982/2010), journalism (Bourdieu, 1998b), and a host of other subjects. He borrowed from anthropology, cultural studies, history, and philosophy, never shying from pointing out the flaws he found there. As I mention in Chapter Four, Bourdieu was critical of Austin and Searle, for instance. To him, they theorize speech acts as if everyone talks in the same way, regardless of their social position. He writes that “my criticisms were in fact aimed at the formalist readings which have reduced Austin's socio-logical indications (in my opinion, he went as far as he could) to analyses of pure logic” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 29). By contrast, *Speech Acts* author John Searle (2006) argues:

the situation with authors such as Bourdieu, Foucault and Habermas is not really better. They think of themselves as acutely conscious of language and its importance for society, but they do not ask, What is language? in a

way that would enable them to ask, How exactly is language constitutive of society? (p. 5)¹

In other words, Bourdieu, a Sociology Professor at the Collège de France, viewed Searle and other speech acts theorists as too naïve vis-à-vis the social world in which individuals apply language in everyday practice. Conversely, Searle, a Philosophy Professor at The University of California, continues to see Bourdieu's comprehension of the philosophy of language as superficial and overconfident. Perhaps, not surprisingly, each scholar privileges the considerations of his own discipline over those of the other. For the philosopher, the abstract theorization of language is key to understanding the fundamental issues. To the sociologist, the power relations inherent within the social world should dictate the scholars' concerns.

This debate between philosophy and sociology is not unique. Bourdieu is constantly criticised for lacking attributes he never claimed to have in the first place: he is not artistic enough for art history (Grenfell & Hardy, 2007), not feminist enough for feminism (Adkins & Skeggs, 2004), not geographic enough for geography (Fogle, 2011; Painter, 2009), not journalistic enough for journalism (Benson & Neveu, 2005), and certainly not philosophical enough for philosophy (Hanks, 2005; Searle, 2006; Shusterman, 1999).² Similarly, in my study, I am sure gang scholars will be tempted to

¹ Similarly, Hanks (2005) writes that “broad discussions of the approach have been critical of Bourdieu's claims about language, sometimes with good reason” (p. 78). For more from Bourdieu on speech acts, see Bourdieu (1982/2010; 1990). For more on the subject from other scholars, see Collins (1993) and Marcoulatos (2003).

² Even within the category of philosophy, I find it interesting that Bourdieu is criticized for his “philosophical anthropology” (Peters, 2011), his “philosophy of social science” (Gerrans, 2005), his “sociology of philosophy” (Pestana, 2005), his “philosophy of education” (Mnguni, 1998), his “distinction between philosophical and sociological approaches to Science Studies” (Turnbull & Antalffy, 2009), his

argue my integration of key criminology texts is too limited. Journalists may find my approach too theoretical. Cultural Studies scholars may criticize my exploration—or lack thereof—regarding issues of class, gender, race, and other areas of concentration, probably depending on where their expertise lies. This observation is not designed to protest criticisms. In some cases, such different orientations can greatly improve the overall understanding of a research problem. But, for such criticism to work constructively, a conversation must occur in which all parties exchange ideas, not simply denounce sociology for not being philosophy or vice versa.

As Bourdieu points out, individuals often view their own positions as natural and, in a sense, they become blind to themselves while clear-sighted toward opponents:

the field makes me see right away that what Aron says on Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre will be quite true, quite just, except that Aron does not know from what position he says it. He does not know that he says this from the point of view of a right-wing intellectual. Now, Simone de Beauvoir will see this, Aron's position, very, very well, but not her own.
(Bourdieu, interviewed by Glenn, 2010, p. 36)

Entering debates outside of his central area of expertise, Bourdieu pointed out things that those within the discipline took for granted. He also incorporated this self-reflexivity in his own work. “For me it is very difficult not to begin by criticising oneself when one works according to my logic” (Bourdieu, interviewed by Glenn, 2010, p. 37). In doing so,

“philosophy of mind” (Throop, & Murphy, 2002), his “philosophy of misery” (Peters, 2011), and his “philosophy of space” (Peters, 2011), among many others. While Bourdieu was a prolific thinker, I believe Matonti’s impression that “criticism has targeted a Bourdieu who never actually existed” is an astute observation (Truong & Weill, 2012).

I can see why academics in virtually all disciplines take issue with his work while also positioning him as one of the most heavily cited scholars of the twenty-first century (Truong & Weill, 2012).

I agree with a popular way to read Bourdieu, which is to think “with Bourdieu against Bourdieu” (see Calhoun, LiPuma, & Postone, 1993; Gendron, 2005; King, 2000; Swartz & Zolberg, Verter, 2004; Vandenberghe, 2003, Verter, 2003). Bourdieu demonstrated that culture, the economy, education, and other seemingly separate spheres of study can only be understood through their connections, from looking outside of them and returning with new insights. Ultimately, Bourdieu (1998a) called for “collective intellectuals” to “produce and disseminate instruments of defense against symbolic domination” (p. 20). He called for “a scholarship with commitment,” writing that “the canonical opposition that is made, especially in the Anglo-American tradition, between ‘scholarship’ and ‘commitment’ is devoid of foundation” (p. 18).

While communications departments in North America generally pride themselves on such committed interdisciplinary scholarship (Alhassan, 2007; Babe, 2000; Dorlad, 2002; Hamilton, 2002), the practice is often quite different. I frequently hear from people working or studying in communication and media studies departments that the historians occupy one area of the hallway and the journalists another; the policy people congregate in one room at a communications conference and the cultural studies people in another. The only time these groups come together seems to be during committee meetings, where they will each assert the primacy of their specialized fields.³ Such experiences highlight,

³ Bourdieu is not outside such conflicts. He frequently asserted the importance and rigours of sociology over philosophical musing, naïve celebrations of culture, and the “paper revolutionism” (2003, p. 19) of

for me, the need to look more closely at Bourdieu's call for collective intellectuals, particularly to find ways for communication scholars, criminologists, and journalists to work with one another to provide new insights. These scholars must open dialogues—not determine which group is the most important.⁴ They must find ways to integrate different perspectives in a cohesive and coherent way by self-reflexively considering their positions. This strategy can improve lines of communication inside the university, but also, perhaps more importantly, extend conversations beyond traditional academic discourses by building greater understandings of popular knowledges.

Popular Memory

Citizens generally do not possess accurate statistical knowledge of the probabilities and correlations that relate to their life chances. But they do have thousands of television shows, novels, anecdotes, and newspaper articles within their recent memories that guide them. Regardless of the actual threat, seeing violent groups of young men on television may cause people to avoid the spaces in which they believe these “gangs” congregate; citizens may even report such youths to the police or take action into their own hands as the tragic murder of Trayvon Martin illustrated. Without exonerating individuals like George Zimmerman, who shot Martin on February 26, 2012 as he walked home unarmed

certain Marxist scholars. The difference is that he is self-reflexive about this relationship to the field, and his method of self-analysis provides crucial insights that I think need to be further explored.

⁴ As Gardner (2000) argues in *The Disciplined Mind: Beyond Facts and Standardized Tests, the K-12 Education that Every Child Deserves*, students—and teachers—ought to embrace multiple forms of knowledge rather than the boxed-in, standardization that one can easily read as a symptom of neoliberalism.

from a convenient store, I think it is important to examine the role of popular memory in such situations.

Habitus, this knowledge of the past embodied in the present, relies also on the stories in popular culture that shape people's expectations and understandings of the social world. Thus, implicitly, much of this dissertation relies on an understanding of popular memory as a guiding force that integrates various forms of knowledge and practice in gang reporting. In fact, I think habitus can be viewed as repository of popular memory, which suggests to me that the two models can complement one another. In this way, Foucault and Spigel provide valuable insights that can extend the way researchers work with Bourdieu's concepts to interrogate the various forms of storytelling that comprise popular memory.

Foucault (2003) revealed that the overarching goal throughout his work had been "to reactivate local knowledges—Deleuze would no doubt call them 'minor'—against the scientific hierarchicalization of knowledge and its intrinsic power-effects" (p. 10). He also writes that "it's an actual fact that people...have a way of recording history, or remembering it, of keeping it fresh and using it" (Foucault, 1996, pp. 123-124). Spigel (2001, 2004) updates this concept through her investigation of television and other popular media. She writes that "popular memory is, I believe, popular because it speaks to the concerns of the present in a way that professional histories often do not" (Spigel, 2001, p. 376). Consequently, she argues that "rather than deriding the popular and returning to a more 'legitimate' historical/cultural canon...we need to examine the relationships between popular memory and professional history" (ibid).

These authors provide avenues for exploration into the amorphous networks of meaning that popular culture produces. In my future work, I hope to elaborate the practical and theoretical implications of Foucault's notion of subjugated knowledges, Spigel's call for understanding popular media, and Bourdieu's (1998b) claim that, without critical examination, television news will turn into "an instrument of symbolic oppression" (p. 12). Assessing more closely how official knowledges (e.g., academic, expert, and government) and unofficial knowledges (e.g., local, popular, and unaccredited) work to build and sustain these mental structures is one of the next challenges I will address as I pursue my research.

The Future of Gang Research

The mainstream news media can use gang discourses to provide political power for those who appear tough-on-crime. They can perpetuate stereotypes about gender, race, and geographic location with uncritical employment of the word. And they can justify the physical punishment of those whom the state already punishes geographically, financially, and socially. Exposing these contingent discourses for their symbolic violence is a goal I share with Bourdieu. But, even armed with Bourdieu's arsenal of concepts, certain questions remain unanswered. Specifically, I think questions about new media technologies, gang definitions, and the broad future of gang research require further examination and an expansion of existing (or perhaps even new) conceptual frameworks. In this final section, I suggest three questions scholars can ask based upon my previous findings that summarize positions I hope to further explore through collaborative research projects.

What implications do new media hold for crime reporters?

The intersection between news media, online technologies, and criminal justice will be a hot spot of research within the next decade. As interest in gangs goes online (e.g., Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; King, Walpole, & Lamon, 2007; Morselli & Décary-Héту, 2010; Wolff, McDevitt, & Stark, 2011), such work must move beyond celebrations of the technologies and interrogate the ways journalists and other professionals present, discuss, and challenge common-sense understandings of new technologies and their uses. Thus, the first question I would encourage readers to ask is, *What implications do new media hold for crime reporters?*

Digital innovations and tech-savvy newsrooms are changing the way journalists cover crime. As the American Society of News Editors (2011) argues, “social media platforms continue to emerge as essential newsgathering tools. They offer exciting opportunities for reporters to collect information and for news organizations to expand their reach. But they also carry challenges and risks” (p. 1). In many ways, this is a stimulating time for journalists and researchers to connect with sources, access vast amounts of information, and remain connected to cases as they evolve. But I worry that journalists too frequently echo the messages of lawyers, law enforcement officials, and corporate spokespeople who position online social networking and digital technologies as a golden opportunity for monitoring and tracking people, regardless of the cultural, political, and social consequences.

In the early twentieth century, Thorstein Veblen introduced technological determinism into modern scholarship (Ellul, 1964, Jones 1990). More recently, media

scholars such as Nick Dyer-Witheford (1999) have demonstrated that “to many, the so-called highway running across the electronic frontier seems closer to the late-nineteenth-century U.S. railway development, complete with informational ‘robber barons’” (p. 123). I think it would benefit journalists covering gangs in particular to rethink some of their positions based on such insights. It is not hard to be drawn into what Marx (1964, 1988), Miller (1965, 1979), and Nye (1994, 1997) have called “the technological sublime.” Every minute, Twitter releases about 98,000 tweets, Google answers 700,000 queries, Skype logs 370,000 minutes of conversations, and Facebook members post almost 700,000 status updates (Shanghai Web Designs, 2012). While it is convenient for journalists to go on Facebook or MySpace to find pictures and information about accused criminals and their victims, too few reporters seem to consider the fundamental moral and ethical implications of these practices, and fewer still are raising concerns that journalists—particularly crime reporters—may themselves become objects of state surveillance.

Facebook and law enforcement

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 If you think you or someone you know is in an emergency situation, please call your local police. If you see something on Facebook that may violate the [Facebook terms](#), please report it to us.

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If your police department is interested in setting up a presence on Facebook, check out our [Police Department Guide](#) for information.



Like Send 38,906 people like this. Be the first of your friends.

Figure 7.7: Facebook's page for law enforcement makes it easy for police to gain private information, frequently without the need for a warrant.

While ethics and journalism scholars are taking up questions relating to online technologies (see Allen, 2006; Foust, 2009; Friend & Singer, 2007; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, 2011; Rosenberry & St John III, 2010; Ward, 2008; Ward & Wasserman, 2010a,

2010b), I find research into gangs specifically lagging.⁵ As Facebook, Google, and other corporations make it easier for police and government to access private information and correspondences (see Fleming & Wells, 2010; Marsico, 2010; North, 2010; Plourde-Cole, 2012; Richards, 2010; Semitsu, 2011; Strutin, 2011; Witte, 2010), I fear that such practices may gradually extend to political rivals, dissidents, youth, and other murky populations who are much less threatening (see Fig. 7.7). Furthermore, state representatives could potentially harness the loose definition of “gangs” to target crime reporters who become online “friends” with gang members, and thus subject them to the same online search and seizure techniques in order to find out what they know and with whom they correspond. If this happens, journalists may not even know it since government agencies and corporations are not obliged to reveal such work (again, see Fleming & Wells, 2010; Marsico, 2010; North, 2010; Plourde-Cole, 2012; Richards, 2010; Semitsu, 2011; Strutin, 2011; Witte, 2010). This issue calls for much more vigilant investigation.

Can researchers establish a definition of gangs?

Previous chapters have demonstrated inconsistent, incoherent, and non-existent definitions of “gangs” within the news media. This problem also exists within institutions such as Criminal Intelligence Service Canada (CISC), the Royal Canadian Mounted

⁵ One recent study, supported by Public Safety Canada, simply counts how many “fans” gangs like the Hells Angels and MS-13 have on Facebook and how many “friends” they have on MySpace (Morselli Décary-Héту, 2010). Another study, sponsored by Google Ideas, finds that gang members are indeed participating in online social networks but these technologies have not significantly changed gangs’ activities and physical interactions on the streets (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011). Both studies demonstrate, in my opinion, a lack of critical insight into new media.

Police (RCMP), Department of Justice Canada, and Public Safety Canada. I would love to answer questions such as, What is a gang? What signifies a gang crime? And who constitutes a gang member? But, as I warned from the start, I make no pretensions to hold the key to these problems. In fact, I have not yet found anyone who possesses conclusive solutions to these challenges. Thus, my suggestion is to ask instead, *Can researchers establish a definition of gangs?*

Rather than being swept away trying to define “gangs” in this study, I have demonstrated that authors, reporters, scholars, and other public intellectuals will employ their own schemes of perception to identify criminals, using analogies, metaphors, and similes that envelop such groups in problematic assumption no matter how they explicitly define the word. As Esbensen et al. (2008) demonstrate, even gang members internalize stereotypes to the extent that Black and Latino members are much more likely to refer to themselves as gang members than Caucasians, even though they all fall under the same street gang definition.⁶ This problem has implications not only for media reports, but also for the numerous studies that rely on self-identification by gang members. I think journalism scholars have a duty to highlight these aspects of reporting, question them, and encourage authors to do the same. All of us must be more self-aware regarding how we choose to represent “facts” through language, reflecting more consciously on the allusions, faulty parallelisms, metonyms, and other linguistic devices that accompany

⁶ Those who self-identified as gang members were Black (67%), Hispanic (43%), and Caucasian (15%) in the study (Esbensen et al., 2008).

gang depictions.⁷ For gang scholars, however, I would go even further to question the utility of gang research more broadly.

Should investigators abandon “gang” research altogether?

As many scholars point out, Canadian gang studies continue to rely heavily on American findings, which may not be reflective of Canadian contexts (Caputo & Vallée, 2005; Carrington, 2002; Chatterjee, 2006; Chan & Mirchandani, 2002; Gordon, 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Totten, 2008; Wortley & Tanner, 2004). Clearly, Canadians need to support more research on crime, poverty, (sub)urban development, the stratification of wealth, youth culture, and the many other aspects that comprise the field of gang studies today. But the final question I would pose for serious consideration is, *Should investigators abandon “gang” research altogether?*

To be clear, I am not suggesting that research into crime, culture, journalism, law enforcement, and other related topics should stop. But perhaps centring questions on a term—“gangs”—that no one seems able to define is not the best course of action. It may seem a scary question, particularly for those who have built careers as “gang experts,” but I would suggest that asking whether gang research is actually necessary is an important and fundamental question that researchers overlook at their own peril. Researchers ought ask themselves if “gang” is really the most appropriate concept for interrogating these

⁷ It is telling that even Bourdieu sometimes betrays a notion that language and representation can be separated from literary devices. Speaking of *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (Bourdieu, et al., 1999), he says in an interview that “what we aim to do is to make our readers see the raw absurdity, without any special effects. One of our rules was that there would be no turning of the stories into ‘literature.’ This may seem shocking to you, but there is a temptation, when one is dealing with dramas like these, to write well. The rule here was to be as brutally pragmatic as possible, to allow these stories to retain their extraordinary, and almost unbearable, violence” (Grass & Bourdieu, 2000, p. 26).

issues. Is there not a better way to unlock the questions involving crime, violence, delinquency, identity, marginality, etc.? I raise these questions because I have a strong sense, after completing my dissertation, that researchers can create more meaningful avenues toward such problems by beginning on more solid foundations.

It may seem that forsaking “gangs” would leave no concrete point on which to centre such work; but I argue that abandoning the search for a centre may be the most productive possibility of all. As Derrida (1976, 1978) and others (e.g., Deleuze, 1964/2000, 1969/1990; Deleuze & Guattari 1972/1977, 1980/1993; Lyotard, 1971/2011, 1979/1984) have pointed out, a “decentring event” occurred sometime in the late-twentieth century that drastically changed the academic landscape, particularly within the social sciences and humanities. In my opinion, this change was for the better. As traditional departments like English and Philosophy struggle to adapt, it is the de-centred faculties, those that comprise scholars loosely linked around concepts like culture, information, and media that seem to be thriving. Perhaps such interdisciplinary approaches can find a new way of bringing scholars together and opening lines of communication without premising such collaboration on a term that, in the end, means virtually nothing.

To highlight the potential of this movement, I would posit a parallel between forms of Orientalism in the past and gang studies today. The Orientalists of earlier times, those noble European men who studied the cultures of Egypt, Persia, and North Africa like awe-struck strangers gazing at a distant and magical land, seem somewhat absurd to most people in the social sciences and humanities today. It may have taken Said’s (1978/2003) canonical work to hammer the final nail in the coffin, but this large group of

scholars and intellectuals has now disappeared completely from scholarly research along with “the Orient.” This is not to say that researchers have stopped investigating themes relating to the Middle-East. But instead of gathering positivist data and encyclopedic information about a strange and foreign culture, more nuanced and insightful perspectives have emerged. Perhaps gang scholars are destined for the same kind of movement, a movement away from problematic—and in many ways imaginary—constructions of “gangs,” a movement away from generalizations about youth, urban culture, and the everyday practices of diverse communities, and instead a movement toward more heterogeneous forms of analysis that incorporate theories of class, crime, gender, geography, race, youth, etc. through de-centred and dynamic collaborations.

In this study, I have endeavoured to provide tools for questioning and reflecting upon representations of gangs in contemporary Canadian journalism in more critical, nuanced, and productive ways. Changing the schemes of perception is not the same as changing the social world, but it is an important step in altering the way people view and understand that world. Though I do not expect consensus, I believe scholars must consider the implications for new media in crime reporting, the possibility of defining gangs, and finally, the future of “gang” studies more broadly. Much of what will become of criminal justice policies, crime reporting practices, and community improvement programs rests on the responses.

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APPENDIX A: Letter of Permission

To whom it may concern,

This note is with respect to "'Gang" as Empty Signifier in Contemporary Canadian Newspapers,' an article to which I contributed. I am aware of, and consent to, the use of a version of this article in Chris Richardson's dissertation *Communicating Crimes: Covering Gangs in Contemporary Canadian Journalism*.

Regards,

Liam Kennedy

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Distinguished Graduate Student Award
2008
- Canadian Association of Journalism (CAJ)
Student Award for Excellence in Journalism
2004
- Related Work Experience**
- Instructor
The University of Western Ontario
2010-2012
- Publications**
- Richardson, C., & Skott-Myhre, H. A. (Eds.) (2012). *Habitus of the Hood*. Chicago: Intellect Press.
- Richardson, C. (2011). "Can't Tell Me Nothing": Symbolic Violence, Education, and Kanye West. *Popular Music & Society*, 34 (2), 97-112.
- Richardson, C. (2010). "The Empty Self in Revolutionary Road or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Blonde." *The European Journal of American Culture*, 29 (1), 5-17.